

Increasing ELL Parental Involvement and Engagement: Exploration of K-12 Administrators in a Rural State

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Abstract

This study reports the findings from an exploration of K-12 administrators in a rural state about how they can more effectively engage and involve families of English language learners (ELLs). The guiding questions for this study are: (1) How does the role of administrators influence the engagement and involvement of ELL parents within K-12 education? (2) What can administrators do within their districts specific to their district in order to facilitate ELL parental engagement and involvement? Through an online survey and in-person interviews, the authors focus specifically on the perceived level of engagement of ELL families as it pertains to districts in general and a specific district. Furthermore, preconceived notions of expectations and language differences and the effectiveness of programs currently offered overall throughout the rural state are explored. Finally, the authors offer suggestions on how to better involve and engage ELLs and their families.

Keywords: ELL parent involvement, K-12 administrators, ELLs in rural areas

1. Introduction

The Condition of Education by the US Department of Education (2018) reported that there were approximately 4.8 million students nationwide who were identified as ELLs (9.5 percent of K-12) during the 2015-2016 school year. Along with an increase of ELLs, schools across America are to follow the guidelines set-forth by the US Department of Education, including the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), and the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). What is notable is that this growing wave of linguistic diversity is not limited to large metropolitan areas. In fact, growth has been much more rapid in less populated rural states. O'Neal, Ringler, and Rodriguez (2008) reported that "ELL students and their families tend to settle in geographical locations that are rural" (p. 6). Similarly, Reed (2010) stated that rural areas are experiencing a rapid increase in racial and ethnic diversity in their student populations; therefore, schools in rural states are facing unique educational challenges in meeting the needs of diverse student populations, including ELLs, a group with which teachers feel inadequately prepared to work productively. With respect to ELL students' academic achievement levels, many states reported that dropout rates for ELLs are significantly higher than dropout rates for non-ELL students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). In some rural states, dropout rates have increased, and graduation decreased within last five years mainly because of the educational and social challenges that ELLs face in their lives (Walker, 2012).

Research in the field of education is constantly striving to improve student learning, and the importance of parental involvement in student success at school now seems factual. In this regard, there have been several research studies that demonstrate a positive correlation between parental involvement and overall student achievement (Reglin, King, Losike-Sedimo, & Ketterer, 2003; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Calarco, 2016). Indeed, parental involvement as an effective factor in improving student learning is no longer a subject of debate (Wei & Zhou, 2012).

With respect to ELLs, a positive correlation between the ELL parental involvement and ELL student learning has been firmly established (Panferov, 2010). However, Panferov (2010) also states that "we expect parental involvement with the schooling of their children to be important to students' success; however, we often know little or nothing about who the parents are and the realities of their own education" (p. 107). Recognizing the dire need to better understand ways to more effectively support the ELL parental involvement in their children's schools, this study focuses on the role of the K-12 administrators within a rural state public schools. The importance of this study lies in the two following areas. First, the rapid growth of ELLs in rural areas is now a

mainstream concern in US and many other countries and yet investigation of the role of K-12 administrators in better preparing their ELLs by increasing their parental involvement remain sorely understudied in the literature. It is imperative to fill such a gap given that K-12 administrators are instrumental in a school's success and consequently, the success of all students including ELLs (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016; Lugg & Shoho, 2006). Second, this study takes place in a small town in a Western state. Given that the National Center for Educational Statistics showed that the ELL population in the Western states has more than doubled in the decade between 1995-2005 (NCES, 2006), there is a high need of greater efforts to better support ELLs' learning in rural states. The rest of paper is organized in the following ways. The conceptual framework that follows briefly discusses the concepts of Microaggressions (DeAngelis, 2009) and Deficit Theory (Gorski, 2008) and how they are employed as a guiding lens for this study. Subsequent sections are on the methodology, findings, discussions, and implications followed by the conclusion.

1.1 Microaggressions

According to DeAngelis (2009), microaggressions are found within "many well-intentioned whites who consciously believe in and profess equality unconsciously act in a racist manner". Those to whom these are directed "experience an erosion of their mental health, job performance, classroom learning, the quality of social experience, and ultimately their standard of living" (Sue, 2010). DeAngelis (2009) quotes Sue to say that we need to realise that "Microaggressions hold their power because they are invisible, and therefore they don't allow us to see that our actions and attitudes may be discriminatory" (p. 42). Along with these microaggressions, marginalization is what Suárez-Orozco, et al. (2015) note as being elusive, that the perpetrator "recognizes neither his or her position of privilege nor the multiple previous incidents that may have been encountered by the victim of the course of a lifetime" (p. 152).

Microaggressions are directed towards ELLs when considering the language used within the classroom itself. As LópezLeiva and Khisty (2014) document, "different languages found in the classroom have different statuses, with the language(s) of non-dominant students having low status and even being the object of derision and prejudice" (p. 422). Furthermore, the authors found that Olsen (1997) and Valdés (2001) have investigated these microaggressions within classrooms to highlight ELLs' feelings of anxiousness and a sense of being 'unwelcome'. It is for this reason, that microaggressions and marginalization exist within education, that the authors wish to move beyond the seemingly acceptance of "business as usual" and do as Berk (2017) extorts, to be the one to address the proverbial elephant: "the harmful consequences to students and faculty, the learning environment, campus climate, and society of ignoring that elephant can be more terrifying" (p. 104). As Souto-Manning (2016) explains, these consequences, this "ignoring their promise as bilingual and multilingual individuals, and instead seeing them as being 'at risk,' we perpetuate educational inequities" (p. 265). Unfortunately, the authors found that these inequities perspective is nothing new but needs to change as K-12 administrators seek to further engage and involve ELL families.

Nieto (2005) explains how "Current discourse continues to position marginalized groups as predetermined low achievers by using buzzwords such as 'at risk' and 'disadvantaged,' terms reminiscent of the reasoning used as the basis of the theories made popular in the 1960s" (p. 46). Considering how Souto-Manning (2016) remarks of how "children who speak languages other than English should not be defined in terms of English" (p. 265) as it "would position them as having an inferior status or take a deficit perspective" (p. 265), is reason enough to focus on the administration for they are the leaders of their respective school(s) and consequently the acceptance or not of "business as usual".

1.2 Deficit Theory

The deficit theory purports the aforementioned "business as usual" mindset which again uses a very traditional and Western way of thinking. The deficit theory, according to Gorski (2008), "holds that inequality is the result, not of systemic inequities in access to power, but intellectual and ethical deficiencies in particular groups of people" and "has been used throughout history to justify imperial pursuits" (p. 518). As a conceptual framework, the deficit theory can be useful in exploring how K-12 administrators' in a rural state can better engage and involve ELL students and their families. Perhaps they feel that ELL families are not involved due to their own choice? After all, are there not already plenty of opportunities in general for families to become involved?

Per Collins (1988), any challenge or deviation from these norms of engagement and involvement are to be corrected, not supported. Going further, this theory is accepted as the 'explanation' as to why an ELL student may be labeled 'at-risk' for failing within school and/or a low achiever since many feel that the "cause" is the students themselves. This labeling may be reflected upon the family by the administration, leading to inequality. Arias and Morillo-Campbell (2008) mention of how "Some critics assert that the deficit perspective leads educators to view

culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families as ‘the problem’” (p. 8). Going further, Arias and Morillo Campbell (2008) acknowledge how this labeling indeed “suggests that fault and responsibility lie with the ELL population rather than the school, and that the role of the school is to change the ways families interact with schools” (p. 8).

For instance, in Li and Zhang’s (2004) study, a student called Mei was “intentionally left out by the state and local assessment and accountability systems” (p. 98) and her teachers had “limited knowledge about the effective methods and materials for ESL students like Mei” (p. 97). Another example of the deficit theory within education is told by Townsend and Fu (2001) of a student named Paw who “needed more bridges to her new culture” (p. 109) and “whose cognitive abilities are well developed” (p. 109) was instead placed into a remedial English class with low expectations as she needed “basic skills”. In other words, since her English-language ability was low, it was assumed that her intellectual ability was low, too. This assumption may lead into labeling a student as ‘at-risk’ in that they are ‘at-risk’ academically and may not graduate.

Certain attention/engagement efforts may be given to the families of students who are labeled as ‘at-risk’. Any teacher may submit to the administration that a student is ‘at-risk’ due to their behavior, social tendencies, or even academic performance. The ‘at-risk’ label means that a student may fail in some form within the school system and ultimately fail academically. These students are tracked by a team which includes an administrator, counselors, school psychologist, school nurse, drop-out prevention coordinator, and social worker whom are all based within that school. This team, the Behavior Intervention Team (BIT), meets together once a week to discuss the ‘best’ strategies to reach the student and engage the family within the student’s learning. Specific to ELLs, some of these strategies may include Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) (Kareva & Echevarria, 2013; Daniel & Conlin, 2015) or even Response To Intervention (RTI) (Thorius & Sullivan, 2012; Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, & Moore, 2014).

The status of ELLs being ‘at-risk’ is perpetuated within our society as the stories of both Paw and Mei resonate above. What is more, consider this quote from Sheng, Sheng, and Anderson (2011): “It is generally known that the ELL population is at risk of dropping out; however, there is no direct statistical data available on the dropout rate in the ELL population” (p. 99). Further, the ELL population is being labeled ‘at-risk’ due to not performing well academically simply because of their lack of English proficiency which is seen as a disability of some sort (Klingner, Artiles, & Méndez Barletta, 2006).

The unspoken expectation is that all parents will be engaged and/or involved within their child’s education to a certain degree. Yet administrators ignore or at least choose not to realise how ELLs in particular are unable to reach their potential as their lives and cultures are marginalized through unrealistic expectations of engagement (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). Perhaps it is modeled after a best practice of engagement which is thought to be ‘good enough’ for everyone and so is the only practice available (Gorski, 2008). By being aware of the deficit theory, microaggressions, and marginalizations, I interpreted and analyzed my data by looking beyond the preconceived microaggressions to better understand the barriers of ELL engagement and involvement. Yet being aware was not going to be enough; the authors used these concepts as a starting point in order to better provide suggestions for K-12 administrative improvement. They did this by not accepting it as being ‘good enough’ and going to the K-12 administrators themselves.

2. Method

According to the Wyoming Department of Education (Hallam, 2019), during the 2009-2010 school year, 87 420 students were enrolled state-wide of which 2116 students were “Active” ELL. The enrollment for the current school year (2018-2019) has shown an increase of students enrolled overall, 93 029, of which 3092 were labeled as ELLs, whether they be Active ELL or Monitoring. According to the Wyoming Department of Education’s English Learner Guidebook (2018), an “Active” ELL is defined as a student who has not yet achieved “proficiency” on the English Language Proficiency (ELP) exam and/or has been identified/evaluated by the district through an ELP screening. The Wyoming Department of Education recommends using the WIDA ACCESS Placement Test ELP screening assessment to determine correct status. Over the past nine years, there has been an increase in overall student enrollment of 6.42%. Yet it is very worth noting an astonishing 20.08% growth rate regarding only the “Active” ELL population during the same time period. The overall number of ELLs (both “Active” and “Combined”) has actually decreased by 98 students.

2.1 Quantitative Data Collection

Focusing on quantitative research, the authors used the online survey platform called “Survey Monkey”. This was conducted in order to best understand a holistic perspective of how K-12 administrators are currently engaging and involving ELL students and their families. Previous research had suggested that perceived barriers of culture

and/or language are possible explanations for low engagement and involvement of ELL families (Case, 2015; Wassell, Hawrylak, & Scantlebury, 2015).

Via Survey Monkey, the authors were able to create their own parameters for the questions which included open-ended and Likert-scaled questions. They created a database of emails of all 48 Wyoming Public School Districts as provided by the Wyoming Department of Education Directory for the 2018-2019 school year. They copied the email addresses of the listed K-12 administrative positions which included: superintendent, curriculum coordinator, special education director, assessment coordinator, and the principals of schools. Focusing on a wide-spectrum of administrative positions to try and ensure that whom was contacted would have either current or previous experience with ELLs or could share the survey with someone who was involved with these families, if a participant felt he/she was unable or unqualified to answer the survey in question, it was requested that the survey be forwarded to someone who was able or more qualified.

At times there was one administrator whom completed multiple roles; this was especially seen within smaller districts. Such as, the superintendent of a district may very well also be the principal for one of the schools. The survey created that was available November 2018 for three weeks and was again sent to those whom would have the most perceived contact with ELL families.

2.2 Qualitative Data Collection

Continuing research via face-to-face interviews, the authors focused upon Sagebrush School District (SSD). Within SSD during the 2018-2019 school year there were nearly two thousand enrolled students with five Active ELL students. SSD's student population is 73% White, 12% Native American, 7% Hispanic, 6% multi-race, 1% Asian, and 36% of the population is on free and reduced lunch.

According to its website, SSD is known as a high-achieving district with its scores above state averages on all major standardized. Sagebrush School District is of particular interest because whereas a neighboring district of roughly the same demographics has an ELL coordinator to implement ELL familial engagement, SSD relies solely upon the aforementioned Response To Intervention (RTI) and/or Behavior Intervention Team (BIT) for addressing the needs of students based upon a lack of English proficiency, whether they be a designated ELL or not. Those who participated were the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, two school psychologists, an elementary principal, a middle school principal, and a high school principal. Since the survey was anonymous, those interviewed may very well have taken the survey as well. In other words, some may have taken the survey but opted to not be interviewed or even vice versa. Yet with the time in between the survey given in November 2018 and the interviews conducted in January 2019, participants' answers may have changed or have been forgotten. Using the grounded theory provided by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to understand said themes in order to explain the qualitative findings, the theory was used to "... suggest items for a questionnaire and ... suggest salient hypotheses to verify. After a quantitative study, a qualitative grounded theory of the substantive area leads to grounded explanations of quantitative findings and future research directions" (Glaser, 2008).

3. Results

To reiterate, previous research has suggested that perceived barriers of culture and/or language are possible explanations for low engagement and involvement of ELL families (Case, 2015; Wassell, Hawrylak, & Scantlebury, 2015).

3.1 Overview of Quantitative Research: State-wide Survey

Of the 48 Wyoming Public School Districts, 408 administrators via Survey Monkey were asked to participate in the anonymous survey. At the end of the three-week time period set, only 71 responded. The survey consisted of 14 questions (Appendix A); questions 1-4 were used to establish the demographics of the respondents along with the number of ELLs within their district. Questions 5-7 and Questions 9, 11-14 used a 5-point Likert Scale. Only questions 8 and 10 were open-ended in order for participants to have an in-depth response.

The most common administrative role was that of principal, regardless the level, but the District Administration role was also high followed by administrators who work within the elementary level. Per the survey, the level of specific involvement of ELL families in school/district sponsored events is seen as 'little' and only 4.29% surveyed felt that their families are involved a great deal. When considering if sharing information helps ELL families to meet their expectations, 65.22% agreed that it meets ELL family expectations and 23.19% feel that it falls short. Considering if barriers interfere with ELL families developing trusting relationships with their schools, 42.25% agree and 9.86% strongly agree. Clearly, barriers exist State-wide to ELL family engagement and involvement. What, exactly, these barriers are beyond language and culture and how districts specifically implement these suggestions is what led to the qualitative research within Sagebrush School District.

3.2 Overview of Qualitative Research: In-person Interviews

Since the survey was anonymous and sent to districts within the State of Wyoming, it is reasonable to assume that those within the Sagebrush School District (SSD) also completed the survey. For the interviews, there were 12 questions overall (Appendix B) and some interviewees requested to see the questions beforehand. These questions are intentionally similar to the survey in order to establish continuity and themes. Overall, there was some division amongst those interviewed on the best use of resources for those identified as ELLs. A general consensus was that even with only one or two ELLs, districts can still address individual needs without a formal program. Much like the survey, the administrators felt that providing ways to support student learning at home as well as engaging ELL families within school events would help to build strong, trusting relationships. Even without many ELLs, SSD made it clear that they can still provide an equitable education by using their current resources. These resources include the BIT and a quasi-sheltered instruction model that is not specifically for ELLs but for any student who needs it. Although the tendency is to be more reactive since there is no need due to a low number of ELLs, the resources would be allocated quickly should the need arise.

Through both the quantitative and qualitative research, two specific themes started to emerge: barriers other than language/culture and specific ways to improve ELL engagement and involvement.

3.3 Theme One: Barriers Other Than Language/Culture

Consequently, the schools themselves have the perception that they do well to engage ELL families: 40.85% of those surveyed agreed yet 39.44% neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement. When asked if engaging programs for ELLs are currently offered, 42.86% neither agreed nor disagreed, 25.71% agreed and 22.86% disagreed. The level of effectiveness of the programs currently offered by the districts are moderately effective (49.28%) and are also slightly effective (33.33%). Schools communicative efforts may be beneficial: 45.71% agreed that schools are helping ELL families to meet their expectations via communication but 37.14% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Considering that the awareness of ELL family expectations is a moderate amount at 48.57% and a little bit is known at 30%, the expectations must not be known. Along with not knowing what the expectations are, one respondent lamented that there is a “lack of culturally responsive schooling, lack of culturally sensitive and appropriate communication”. Some did state that this awareness may be due to the number of ELLs within the district: “Having a small ELL population can often seem like the family is isolated”. Expectations may also not be known due to “our expectations of families versus their expectations of schools” or even “work schedules and taking care of family often makes time the greatest obstacle”. To reiterate, the fragments used are direct quotes due to the answers provided online.

Of those surveyed, the level of involvement of ELL families in school/district sponsored events is a ‘little’ involved at 50%, a moderate amount at 38.57%, and only 4.29% felt that their families are involved a great deal. When considering if sharing information helps ELL families to meet their expectations, 65.22% said that it equals ELLs expectations and 23.19% feel that it falls short. When asked if “barriers in general” interfere with ELL families developing trusting relationships with their schools, 42.25% agree and 9.86% strongly agree. This may be a difficult topic to address as one respondent stated that “Communication can be a barrier ... not always, but in certain cases. If school personnel cannot communicate directly with families who have ELL students, it’s less personal and more likely to be misunderstood.”

Regarding communication specific to ELLs, one respondent mentioned that “If school personnel cannot communicate directly with families who have ELL students, it’s less personal and more likely to be misunderstood”. There were plenty of mentions of ‘cultural differences’ as well as “I do not feel that there are specific barriers. I know that parents of ELL students in our district have questions or concerns they are not afraid to ask.” And yet there are concerns, even fears, of the school itself that prohibit parents of ELL students from asking any question. There is a “fear of schools – generational trauma”. Also stated as being “historical trauma”, respondents mentioned it was due to “terrible experiences with the schools they attended” or even “previous poor history with school systems”.

A “poor history” may be due in part to the “lack of familiarity with the educational system here in the states” which prohibits trust of school personnel and thus a lack of engagement and involvement. This lack of trust can even be seen when the district translates something into the family’s home language: “A big barrier is the expectation for parents to fill forms out for registration online. Although it is in Spanish, there is a belief that the system is connected to something outside the district - a government entity.” This belief of a connection to a government entity underlies a barrier that I had not considered before, a family’s immigration status. As one respondent said, “We are affiliated with the government as educators”. This affiliation is realized when “many of our families are

not citizens and fear issues of being reported and tend to distance themselves, even after we have tried to explain why they do not need to". Even when schools try to alleviate this fear, "All of the focus on the US/Mexican border causes some to comment negatively about Mexican immigrants in public venues especially school functions. Some immigrants are afraid to participate". This focus is perpetuated by the deficit theory on a larger level but the schools themselves are also supporting it: "We have a new system to enter areas where students are during school hours and they need a government issued ID".

The issue is not the system itself but rather that "Schools often represent federal or local government and systems like the raptor systems and other security type systems scare them in interacting with schools in a more effective ways." Many participants feared parents may not be able to fulfill this requirement or would simply be unwilling to attend any events where their immigrant/citizenship status may be questioned whilst on school property. This fear ought not be dismissed as whimsical nor irrational for there was a definitive acknowledgement of how a family's immigration status, the fear of being "reported" to the authorities with possible legal ramifications, and even "the fact that the community is seriously considering an ICE facility be built in the county" are explainable barriers to ELL familial engagement and involvement which clearly go beyond language and cultural differences.

Fortunately, the survey respondents also addressed ways to better engage and involve ELL families. Responses included: (1) "go to the ELL families; do not wait for them to come to the schools"; (2) "specifically, individually, invite them to the schools to answer their questions"; (3) "more bilingual events and communication ... concerted efforts towards collaborative partnerships"; (4) "advertising using non-traditional means" with "more personalized connections ... family nights, Heritage, Culture nights, etc."

Having home visits for those who are unable to attend school functions was also mentioned as a way to 'go' to the ELL families. Others stated to "be proactively engaging in community events" and "get them in the schools and represented equally on boards, PTAs and other voices/influences in the district". A way that one district listens is by having "a monthly meeting with the ELL parents. It is often not well attended, but those who attend generally accept and appreciate the information they receive and our ability with Spanish speaking principals to communicate with them". This gap was addressed on the survey when a respondent stated, "I believe that treating all families as welcome valued Stake Holders is very important regardless of the student's disability or any other subcategory". Did this respondent mean that being an ELL is a disability or even its own subcategory? Perhaps so. One way to address this gap is to "Employ more staff who are language learners themselves". What is more, there ought to be "more training for teachers and staff on how to meet the needs of the family and student". This can be seen through "more staff training on culturally responsive/appropriate practices and integration into instructional strategies".

Educating the parents is just as important: "Understand the level of the parents understanding of the educational process. If they can't understand, find a way to make things clearer for them". Referring back to the fear of legal repercussions, making "A greater effort in families feeling safe in the community if they are not legal citizens would hopefully spread to the school environment". One such effort could be as one district is doing, "We are starting a parent-leader group. It is not directly focused towards ELLs but will provide help". This general focus may help districts who "have one ELL student ... the lack of ELL students makes it difficult to get good and ELL family engagement". Regardless of the number of ELL students, a respondent urged administrators to "Start at the elementary level, early grade levels, provide opportunities for families to participate in children learning". By "reaching out with more personalized connections", parents themselves can "partake in their children learning process" through "family literacy nights; opportunities for adult education in the school".

3.4 Theme Two: How to Improve Engagement and Involvement

Since the survey was focused primarily on what prohibits ELL engagement and involvement with subsequent suggestions for improvement, during the interviews the authors tried to focus more on what K-12 administrators are currently doing in order to better engage and involve ELL students and their families. Granted, things that prohibit engagement and involvement were addressed as well, but the focus of the interviews was to further understand what districts can do right now regardless of the number of enrolled ELLs.

Therefore, Mr. J, a principal within SSD, noted the importance of involving parents at the home level by teaching them about ways to support their child's education. He said, "services are provided for them to make sure the educational goals are able to be met for the kids that are language learners". These services are supplemented by extra-curricular activities which "engage our parents in that process and open doors of communication with them and all those kinds of things". Since these activities are outside of the regular school hours, the worry of the Raptor System would not be an issue as it is not in use. To better communicate with ELL families, Mr. J noted the need of: "not just telling them everything and communicating but finding some kind of feedback loop where we could get

feedback from them so asking them these questions, and saying how can we best serve you, how can we best engage you, how do you get better involved in our school, what can we do better to help your kid be more successful at school ... we feel like we have to have all the answers and we need to do a better job at listening sometimes.”

As some respondents of the survey suggested, Mr. J agreed that a stronger home approach can be beneficial. That is to say, “Teach them specific ways that they can help at home ... here’s how you can help practice at home to make this transition easier for your student”. By providing ELL students and their families something that they would be interested in, something that they can be involved in and proud of, their engagement and involvement ought to increase and a partnership is established.

Mrs. S, a school psychologist who routinely administers the ACCESS exam, agreed: “We have to reach out to them ... parents should be partners with the school”. This partnership may be tricky to find as the “attitude of a lot of families is you’re the expert in education ... there’s really not the expectation of being highly involved in the school”. Some in the survey had noted this cultural difference that districts need to educate families on the expectations of the American education system. In my opinion, it is the district’s role to explain what its expectations are for engagement and involvement and not expect that parents will be involved simply by virtue of having their child enrolled within the school district.

Clearly, in order to improve upon engagement and involvement, districts need to educate the parents. This education includes make sure that a family’s literacy needs are met for there may be deficit. To address this, Mrs. S mentioned calling the parent on the phone or how she would even “go to the home and talk with the parent face-to-face”. She was unsure if a letter or even an email sent home was able to be read due to a possible literacy deficit or even a lack of internet access. Mrs. S still follows these procedures but sometimes is unable to follow through. Therefore, she advocated for a liaison, someone who “could go to the home, talk to the parents, find out what their issues are, concerns are ... what we could do for them”.

Taking a holistic approach, Mrs. S. stated, “For our benefit, we need to educate not only the children but we need to find ways to educate the parent and help them assimilate”. This assimilation, rather the process of acculturation, has been echoed by both the survey and interviewees in that there is a need for cultural awareness training for staff and students alike. Mrs. S recognized the need for being ready for this approach, a need to realise that more ELL families are enrolling within Wyoming’s schools. She stated, “Things change very fast. And so I just think you have to be prepared for those changes, and open to them and figure, have a plan ... how are we going to approach these changes ... you know, there’s compromise, on both sides, it’s important”. These changes can be supported by an ELL teacher or ELL liaison.

Even without a designated ELL teacher or ELL liaison, districts could still “train teachers on how to teach ELL students ... getting teachers familiar with different types of sheltering strategies”, explained Mrs. M, a school principal. Ultimately, Mrs. M purports training for “not just our teachers but also our students as well, because, you know, part of that is being respectful of diversity. A lot of cultures are so different but in the same way we can learn so much from our ELL students and how it is different but also how we are the same”.

Echoing similar sentiments found within the survey, Mr. B, a school principal within SSD, stated that parents may not be “comfortable in the school setting” because “they had a bad experience in school”. In order to create a comfortable setting that is within the school itself but before school hours, Mr. B uses food as an engagement ploy to establish trust and certain welcoming cues that are positive for all involved through a program called “Muffins for Moms” and “Donuts for Dads”. To his mind, much as Mrs. M rallied for connecting with ELL families, Mr. B emphasized the use of proper “welcoming cues” to establish a trusting environment that is again at the school itself:

“You have to be very cautious on how you (are) perceived so we call them welcoming cues. And so, how do you feel the moment you walk into this building. Do you feel welcomed, or do you feel, like, patronized? And we want to make sure that we don’t do that.”

These ‘welcoming cues’ are a positive way to implement engagement for everyone, especially

“if school was a bad experience for them, we want to try and reverse that the best we can”, reflected Mr. B. To rectify any bad experiences for ELL families and/or to prevent them from happening, Mr. L, who oversees the ELL program, is actively trying to implement change through an intervention process. As in, “just like a student who might be struggling with reading, or math, or behavior, we try and individualize that plan based upon each student’s needs” as part of “an ongoing process through that Behavior Intervention Team”, the BIT team of that student’s building. There is not an ELL certified staff member on any BIT team within SSD, a fact that Mr. L

acknowledged leads to the district doing “better with the kids that are (English-speakers) and need support than with kids that are trying to learn English”.

When asked about district communication in general, especially as the director of the ELL program, Mr. L stated that “the goal is to communicate in their home language, but it is hard for ELL parents to attend events sponsored by the school/district if the parents do not understand the invite for said event.” Sending communication out to parents in their native language via Google translate is an option often used, stated Mr. L, along with providing resources ELLs via Response To Intervention (RTI) (Thorius & Sullivan, 2012; Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, & Moore, 2014).

The use of RTI provides what Mr. B acknowledged as “a process of testing and evaluation” along with “suggested information on how to address them through WIDA, but I think what we’re doing is far better than what they are suggesting for those kids”. While it is a seemingly bold statement, Mr. B defended this stance in that “those language skills transcend a lot of students” and “I believe that we use those same techniques into our other students and that really benefits them”. In other words, although there may not be a designated ELL teacher, liaison, or even a ‘high number’ of ELLs within a district, administrators can use what they already have in-place to improve ELL engagement and involvement.

Another school psychologist is Mrs. A who administers the ACCESS exam for elementary students at SSD. Mrs. A pointed-out that SSD has “a lot of activities, evening activities ... parent night and those are generally put on based upon our Title I requirements and we get good involvement and engagement with that”. Referencing the BIT process, “the intervention process has been a good process for any student who is struggling ... and has been good for all students that need that support”, explained Mrs. A.

Throughout this theme, in order to increase ELL parental engagement and involvement, the district itself has to do more by reaching families where they are at. Administrators need to work towards changing the mindset and past experiences of ELLs and bring them into the schools to develop a strong, trusting, and supportive relationship. This can be seen through an ELL parent liaison but at the very least, as Mrs. M explained, somehow connecting administrators and families literally within the community.

For instance, “doing a breakfast, a donut and coffee at like one of the coffee houses, for you know, hey, come meet administrators ... have questions answered, drink a cup of coffee, stuff like that”. This would help to establish a rapport between the district and ELL families on neutral ground to then move towards the schools themselves and get the families through the front doors. On school grounds, not during the school day, “monthly curriculum nights for our content areas” or “games nights once a month through our student council where we invite parents in” would involve both the teachers and hopefully the community to support this initiative of helping every student succeed.

4. Discussion

Throughout the project, research has shown that the issues regarding familial engagement and involvement is more than cultural differences or even language barriers. Through the survey and the interview, the role of K-12 administrators regarding ELLs needs to seriously be reconsidered since districts and perhaps even the administrators themselves are at least in part barriers to ELL engagement and involvement. Elfers and Stritikus (2013) show that “principals who focus on instruction, foster community and trust, and clearly communicate school mission and goals can change instructional practice” (p. 309) which in turn may lead to further engagement and involvement through a refocus of current practices.

According to Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova (2008), the environment of the district and their schools need to be considered: “Such contexts undermine students’ capacity to concentrate, their sense of security, and their ability to experience trusting relationships in school, as well as their ability to learn” (p. 91). If the goal is to engage and involve ELL families more at school events and create positive experiences for these families, more must be done to ensure that the purpose of the system is being communicated.

Good, Masewicz, and Vogel (2010) explain how:

“Communication barriers for parents were more deeply rooted in relationships than in language differences. Teachers, as representatives of the American school culture, also experienced communication gaps that impeded their relationships with Hispanic parents and students. For both parents and teachers, it was a lack of relationships that inhibited communication, mutual understanding, trust, and, subsequently, parental involvement” (p. 336).

Clearly, my involvement with this project also prohibits an objective outlook since my own worldview, values, and perspectives are used to analyze as well as seek answers (Wolcott, 2001) to increasing ELL engagement and involvement.

What is more, these engagement and involvement practices do not need to be costly nor contingent upon provided funding. Schools without Title I funding or even schools with low levels of ELL students can still be involved with the engagement and involvement of ELL families regardless of how many ELLs they have. We truly have an obligation to not only our ELL families but also to society. That is to say, as Cefai, Cavioni, Bartolo, Simoes, Miljevic-Ridicki, and others (2015) advocate, “A whole-school approach, which includes the school climate and ethos as well as the formalized curriculum in all its aspects, needs to reflect the experiences and cultures of the various cultural and ethnic groups and match with the learning, cultural and motivational styles of all the learners” (p. 124). Reflecting upon the insights gained from not only the literature reviewed, the survey conducted, and the interviews, there are clear implications moving forward in order to ensure ELL familial engagement and involvement.

5. Implications

To bring ELL families into the school, this stereotypical engagement is not advisable as editor Steinberg (2009) remarks: “Failure to consider how multiethnic students locate themselves in activities asking them to bring food from ‘their culture’ or to step inside a circle if they are nonwhite excludes as many students as it includes” (p. 477). The article “From the ‘Good Kids’ to the ‘Worst’” (Harklau, 2000) immediately states that K-12 administrators need to take into consideration students’ needs, backgrounds, and experiences which most definitely lead towards their ‘school identity’ and attitude towards learning. If a student is identified as being ‘at-risk’, their school identity may mirror this and the authors do not feel that they will be within an instructional climate that is validated.

According to Cummins (2001), all districts and thus schools should always be an “instructional climate where the linguistic and cultural experience of the whole child is actively accepted and validated” (p. 20). Once again, Mr. B’s programs of “Muffins for Moms” and “Donuts for Dads” along with family literacy nights, game nights, etc. create the bridge between K-12 administrators and ELL families that this project seeks to support.

Many survey respondents noted a lack of connection with families due to ‘language differences’. As stated by Cummins (2005), “not only enables students to bring their two languages into productive contact but also communicates to them that their LI proficiency is an important accomplishment that is acknowledged and appreciated within the classroom” (p. 588). In this way, ELL families ought not fear the ‘at-risk’ label as the deficit theory purports. Instead, as Chu Lau, Juby-Smith, Desbiens (2017) encourage, K-12 administrators need to “deconstruct social stereotypes, promote respect for diversity, and cultivate self-reflexivity regarding complicity in social injustice” (p. 100).

During the survey, respondents stated that they had little to no ELLs and as such did not know how to properly involve ELLs and their families. Even within SSD, administrators acknowledged a more ‘reactive’ approach would readily be taken due to the current low number of ELLs. This low number was reasoned to be in part due to what Walker (2012) acknowledged, of how “teachers in rural school districts frequently have limited experience with ELL students, making professional development paramount but often expensive, because professional development opportunities are much more limited in rural areas than in urban centers” (p. 472).

This approach, though, is detrimental to the ELL families who are within the district and it does not help every student to succeed. Regardless of the number of ELLs, engagement and involvement can be increased through extra-curricular activities such as literacy nights, game nights, having ELL families volunteer or be guest lecturers, and establishing a general partnership with families that is not focused on the school itself. Once again, this partnership extends beyond the school walls and into the community. Partnering with the local church to serve a meal or even with the public library to provide ELL classes is a great way to begin establishing trusting relationships between schools and families. The schools need to not be seen as the ‘experts’ but rather ‘partners’ within education.

K-12 administrators need to remember that this partnership does not mean being an ‘expert’ of all cultures that comprise their districts nor do they need to be fluent in all languages. K-12 administrators need to realise as Jiang (2000) does that “in a word, language and culture, as different as they are, form a whole” (p. 329). This whole is what many survey respondents felt the need to do, in order to establish a ‘whole’ relationship they had to be able to ‘speak’ the language of the ELLs. Cummins (2007) explains of how “monolingual teachers can also engage in this kind of pedagogical practice by utilizing the bilingual resources of students in the classroom as well as through collaboration with colleagues, paraprofessionals and community members who speak students’ home languages” (p. 228).

There is a perceived deficit of not being a part of the mainstream culture nor speaking the dominant language which is, of course, English. This deficit can once again lead to an ‘at-risk’ label and what Elfers and Stritikus (2013) call “low academic tracks with inexperienced teachers, and many experience pressure to forgo defining

elements of their culture and language” (p. 311). Overlooking the culture and language of ELLs due to a low enrollment number and/or their ‘at-risk’ status is to my mind practices that the Every Student Succeeds Act clearly prohibits.

Too often administrators do as Li (2006) cautions against and “neglect the autonomy of students and their families regarding what they can contribute to instruction and curriculum. Minority children bring to school a repository of knowledge from their homes and communities” (p. 6). Administrators need to recognize and support the differences that ELLs bring to school in order to establish relationships that are different from what the media or society portrays. No longer can districts be reactive but rather proactive to ensure that their teachers are culturally sensitive to the needs of all students and their families.

Undoubtedly, administrators feel the pressure of society for their schools to “solve social problems” but ELL parental engagement and involvement is not dependent upon just the K-12 administrators. The community itself needs to be educated through what Ladson-Billings (2006) suggests and “maintain teachers’ focus on what improves the lives of the students, families, and communities they serve- not to make teachers feel better about themselves” (p. 36). There is a commitment from the administration to the parents in addition to the community that extends to all families but especially to ELLs.

This research has shown that districts must ensure that they are moving towards a culturally responsive mindset for all students, staff, and ultimately community members. In order to do this, districts must include their ELL families via events that are aimed to encourage their involvement and ensure multicultural education is realised for all students. These changes begin with community collaboration and not just schools themselves. The issues addressed here are undoubtedly not unique; they are most likely felt within the community and thus the community’s involvement and support of ELL engagement and involvement is paramount.

An important aspect of engaging and involving ELL families will be to supersede “superficial cultural awareness” (Walker, 2012). Instead of having a “tourist curriculum” as the basis for family engagement, I advocate for culturally-relevant and sensitive themed events can be used to bring proper engagement and involvement within districts. This engagement starts by being rid of ignorance and preconceived notions of ELLs which is fueled by the deficit theory and microaggressions. As DeAngelis (2009) exhorts, there is a need to realise that “Microaggressions hold their power because they are invisible, and therefore they don’t allow us to see that our actions and attitudes may be discriminatory”. Kumagai and Lypson (2009) caution that

“if one focuses on acquiring knowledge about ‘other’ cultures and treats the concept of culture as static, one runs the risk of objectifying individuals whose appearance, language, national origin, religion, or sexual orientation is different from the majority into overly simplistic categorical descriptions of character and behavior” (pp. 782-783).

In order for districts to start to engage and involve ELL families more, they need to do as Cummins (2001) suggests and help society in “rejecting the negative attitudes and ignorance about diversity that exist in the wider society” (p. 20). A model of this is given by Flinders and Thornton (2013): “It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, not to impose our view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours” (p. 161).

The implications of this research are applicable to all districts, regardless of the number of ELLs enrolled. It is perhaps best summed up by this quote: “Listen to them. How do they want to engage? We can’t assume that the way we would engage is the way they do, given factors such as culture, language barrier, poverty, etc.” Districts must not use ‘barriers’ as an excuse for the reason why families are not engaged or involved. They must realise that they do have the same expectations of success for their students as everyone else does. Their lives, their cultures are different, and this is an asset, not a deficit. Nieto (2017) encourages that:

“Rather than the expectation that students need to ‘burn their bridges’- that is, forget and reject their native language and ethnic culture-they can instead become bilingual and bicultural. When teachers act as bridges, they send a message to their students that their identities are worthwhile. This is a valuable disposition for all teachers to have (pp. 131-132).

6. Conclusion

Berk (2017) encourages all administrators to be the change that brings districts and, ultimately, communities together: “the harmful consequences to students and faculty, the learning environment, campus climate, and society of ignoring that elephant can be more terrifying” (p. 104). The ‘elephant’ is the mindset of “business as usual” which has to be challenged with events that are geared towards recognizing and supporting an ELL family’s cultural differences.

This has to be challenged in order to be finally be rid of the deficit theory, which according to Gorski (2008), “holds that inequality is the result, not of systemic inequities in access to power, but intellectual and ethical deficiencies in particular groups of people” and “has been used throughout history to justify imperial pursuits” (p. 518). Harper and Pelletier (2010) place the onus on the families, though: “ELL parents’ increased time with their children on educational activities at home may compensate for their difficulty in communicating with their children’s English-speaking teachers” (p. 125). In order to further understand and address engagement and involvement issues, the authors suggest that more action be taken to reach out to a variety of stakeholders within the community in order to start developing the trusting relationships that have been discussed herein. The number of ELLs within all schools in the State of Wyoming is on the rise; this group needs to be involved with their expectations met sooner rather than later.

Knowing that the barriers to ELL engagement and involvement go beyond simply “language” or “culture”, K-12 administrators must not continue with current outreach practices and instead ensure that the activities provided for ELL families are within their best interest by ensuring that they are involved and maybe even be in charge of said practices. I would agree if administrators correctly assume that all parents strive to be engaged and or involved within their child’s education; few would disagree that parental involvement is a key asset for student success (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). Yet ELLs are unable to reach their potential as the methods of engagement are based solely upon the notion of the barriers mentioned herein. To move beyond these barriers, districts must go to the parents with the community, together, to properly engage and involve all English Language Learner families.

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Appendix A

Questions used for the State-wide survey

- 1) What is your administrative position/role within your District?
- 2) Which level of education are you associated with? Please choose any level that may apply.
- 3) How many years have you been in your current position? Please include your current year of experience.
- 4) According to the Wyoming Department of Education, “English [Language] Learners (ELLs) are those students in Wyoming schools whose primary language is other than English”. Approximately how many ELL students are currently enrolled in your District? Please also note if the enrollment includes Active, Monitoring, or Combined.
- 5) What is the level of involvement of ELL families in your District/School sponsored events?
- 6) Does sharing District/School information with ELL families help meet their expectations?
- 7) Barriers exist that interfere with Schools/ELL families developing trusting relationships.
- 8) What may be some barriers that interfere with Schools/ELL families developing trusting relationships?
- 9) Schools in your District do well to engage ELL families.
- 10) What can Schools do better to improve ELL parent/family engagement in order to develop strong, trusting relationships?
- 11) Your District/Schools currently offer engaging programs for your ELL families.
- 12) How effective are the programs that your District/Schools offer for your ELL families?
- 13) Our District/Schools communicate information to our ELL families in a way that helps to meet their expectations.
- 14) How aware are you of ELL family expectations regarding District/School involvement?

Appendix B

Questions used for the In-person interviews

- 1.) What is your name and position within the District?
- 2.) How would you define ELL parent/family engagement and involvement?
- 3.) What is the level of involvement, real or perceived, of ELL families within your District and your school?
- 4.) How aware are you of ELL family expectations regarding school involvement?
- 5.) What are some ways to actively involve ELL families within the school?
- 6.) How aware are you of current practices to reach the ELL community?
- 7.) What do schools expect from the ELL families? Conversely, what do ELL families expect from schools?
- 8.) What do schools do well to engage with parents and families in general?
- 9.) How effective are these programs? What are some ways they can be more effective?
- 10.) What can schools do to improve ELL parent/family engagement in order to develop strong, trusting relationships?
- 11.) What are some of the barriers that interfere with schools/ELL families from developing trusting relationships?
- 12.) What can schools do to improve ELL parent/family engagement in order to develop strong, trusting relationships?

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