

# From the Mouths of Experts

## Relationship-Building Advice from Immigrant & Refugee Families

**Brooke Kandel-Cisco, Katie Brooks, Catherine D. Bhathena,  
Howaida Abdulahad, Maria Pimentel-Gannon, & Hilina Fessahaie**

### Introduction

As the population of English language learners (ELLs) in our schools increases, school leaders seek to build more culturally and linguistically sustaining school communities. Often, the first step in these efforts is to intentionally invite ELLs and their families to school-based events with the hope of involving parents in their children's formal education. School leaders might partner with teachers to organize family math nights, arrange transportation to teacher-parent conferences, or hire a translator to make the school newsletter linguistically accessible.

Yet, educators frequently end up frustrated that immigrant and refugee (IR) families do not show up for these events or that these events seem to have little effect on the academic outcomes of ELLs in their schools.

### From Family Involvement to Family Engagement

The research literature on parental engagement has called for a shift in how educators interact with IR families that moves away from *involving* parents—which sometimes feels like

ticking off boxes on a checklist—toward *engaging* those families in conversation, co-learning, and co-creation of authentic and transformative school-family collaboration (Ishimaru, 2017; Olivos, Jiménez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

A collaborative engagement approach with IR families is more likely to create home-school connections that are culturally and linguistically sustaining—connections that reflect and value the deep knowledge IR families possess. When IR families trust that their experiences are understood and their linguistic and cultural resources are appreciated, they are more likely to engage in sustained relationships with educators.

A collaborative engagement approach also can encourage teachers to notice and unlearn unconscious deficit perspectives in their work with families. For example, it is not uncommon for a school to offer a family literacy night in which teachers show families how to engage in reading and writing or how to play literacy-based games. While these events are not necessarily harmful, they may unintentionally communicate to families that home literacy practices and funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) are not understood or valued by the school community. Families may be unintentionally socialized into a narrow view of literacy and of what constitutes “good” students and involved and supportive families (Torres & Hurtado-Vivas, 2011).

A collaborative engagement approach, in contrast, includes IR families working side by side with teachers, sharing decision-making, and increasing the likelihood that school

experiences integrate the assets that culturally and linguistically diverse families bring to the school community. This shared leadership between families and teachers may also positively transform the dominant leadership models in a school.

Traditionally, school leadership has been viewed as emanating from a sole source, the school administrator. This perspective ultimately oversimplifies the difficult work that administrators must navigate to ensure the success of all learners. While there is no doubt that many individual school administrators are empathetic and compassionate educators, unilateral decision-making means that the cultural, linguistic, and social lenses utilized to inform decision-making are limited to the perspective of the administrator (Kandel-Cisco, 2016).

In schools with significant numbers of students from IR backgrounds, the administrator and even “mainstream” teachers may tend to exhibit a sense of learned helplessness—for example, asking the school English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teacher or parent coordinators to take care of all decisions related to the IR population (Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010). A collaborative approach to engagement with IR parents serves to qualitatively transform the school experience for diverse learners and their families.

This approach promotes the purposeful distribution of responsibility, decision-making, and privilege across school staff, families, and community members. Educational leadership scholars have described this approach to school leadership as *shared governance* (Blase & Blase, 2000; Theoharis,

*Brooke Kandel-Cisco is a professor, Katie Brooks is a professor, and Catherine D. Bhathena is a grant manager, all with the College of Education at Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana. Howaida Abdulahad, Maria Pimentel-Gannon, and Hilina Fessahaie are all natural helpers at the Indianapolis Immigrant Welcome Center, Indianapolis, Indiana.*

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2010), emphasizing participative decision-making and embodying a power that is facilitative in nature.

### Why Collaborative Family Engagement—What Did We Learn?

Our family engagement work began by partnering with the Indianapolis Immigrant Welcome Center, a resettlement support agency, to connect with IR families. We wanted to understand the families' experiences with our local schools and learn how they would like to engage with schools in the future.

Natural Helpers, volunteers from the center who work with families to help with the resettlement process, served as cultural brokers and assisted us in interviewing 113 local immigrant families from Burma, the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Nigeria, Togo, Eritrea, Ghana, the Philippines, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, Columbia, and Syria.

The stories families shared shaped and refined our understanding of why and how collaborative family engagement is an essential component in creating culturally sustaining learning environments that support ELLs in reaching their full potential.

Beyond the Natural Helpers and IR families, our work expanded to include practicing educators. We invited a cohort of educators pursuing an ESL license at our university to spend time with the Natural Helpers, who would, in turn, facilitate those educators' interactions with IR families from local school communities.

Building trust and relationship with families was an essential entry point for collaborative family engagement, and listening was a key component. As local K–12 educators listened to the families' stories, joys, and concerns, they learned that families have much to offer schools and that the educators have much to learn from and with families. Initial interactions with families led to a snowball effect—the families helped connect to additional IR families who had not been reached through more traditional parent involvement initiatives.

The key themes we gleaned from the conversations were (a) the importance of building relationships between families and educators, (b) the importance of building relationships between families with different backgrounds, (c) the need for educators to question their assumptions, and (d) the value in recognizing and integrating families' funds of knowledge.

### Ideas for Moving Toward Collaborative Family Engagement

Informed by our research and the themes we identified, teachers in our cohort worked with the Natural Helpers to develop projects to help connect with, build relationships with, and learn from IR families in their schools. Projects that supported intentional collaborative family engagement included story circles, living room conversations, and multilingual story sharing.

#### Story Circles

Two teachers from different urban school districts who worked in adult basic education programs collaborated with their adult ELL students and their students' families to host a story circle event. Prior to the event, the adult ELL students worked with their classmates to develop the stories they wanted to share for the story circle. At the event, families first came together over food they contributed. During the meal, the adult ELL students built a safe space for sharing through informal conversations.

Next, one teacher, herself an immigrant, and several students shared their stories of immigration, comparisons of schooling in their home countries and in the United States, and struggles they have moved through as they have acculturated to their new country. Finally, the families reflected on the similarities of their various stories and shared hopes for the future, particularly regarding their own educational goals and those they have for their children.

Story circles provide a venue for educators, families, and community members to learn from and with each other by telling personal stories that are important to them and that impact their communities and schools. First, the host of the story circle identifies individuals who have the insight and willingness to share their experiences. The host should consider the home languages of the community and make plans for language support and possibly translation.

An advantage of the story circle approach is that participants' stories can be planned and prepared in advance. Care must be taken in facilitating the story circle, as the host must support participants in developing group norms, creating a safe space for sharing, providing time for reflection and discussion, reviewing assumptions of confidentiality and privacy, and making meaning of the experience. The host makes sure to record the ideas of the group through notes

or recording with permission of all the participants (adapted from Maslin-Ostrowski, Drago-Severson, Ferguson, Marsick, & Hallett, 2018).

Initial topics to consider include who the educators and family members are, where they are from, and what their stories are.

#### Living Room Conversations

One of our Natural Helpers suggested that we use living room conversations to learn more about each other, hear different perspectives, build understanding, and develop relationships. Living room conversations are less formal than story circles, and they focus on having civil discourse across different perspectives, especially on controversial topics. They are more opinion based but may include some personal storytelling.

A teacher from a charter school that provides an alternative pathway to a high school diploma invited students, faculty, and community members to a discussion of how to improve the education of ELLs. Five students, two from Myanmar and one each from Mexico, Sierra Leone, and Syria, shared their opinions on how our local education system interacts with and addresses the needs of IR students. The conversation concluded with sharing ideas about how to improve the education system in ways that welcome IR families as partners and increase academic learning of ELLs in all content areas.

Typically, someone who wants to host a living room conversation is intentional in inviting participants who bring different perspectives or experiences for a conversation on a chosen topic. Similar to story circles, the host should consider language proficiency and the need for language support or translation.

The conversations begin with a brief overview of the purpose of the conversations and a review of conversation agreements. Then the participants share their reasoning for participating in the conversation, the core values that guide their perspectives on the topic, their experiences and beliefs related to the topic, and their reflections on what they learned from engaging in the discussion of the topic with people with different perspectives.

Topics might include perspectives and experiences with school engagement, living in the local community, culture, faith, education, language, and parenting.<sup>1</sup>

### Multilingual Story Sharing

Two educators in a rural school district reimagined a traditional family literacy event with IR families in mind. The educators collaborated with the public library to host monthly multilingual story nights. The library was excited to partner because it had been looking for ways to engage immigrant families and provided the space and a small snack for each event.

The school district provided the books and materials for crafts that families could work on during the first 30 minutes as they gathered. The craft time provided time and space for families to get to know each other as well as any school and district personnel at the event and also gave families a cushion so that if they were running late, the space would be invitational.

During story sharing, a different bilingual book was read each month by family members—one fluent English speaker and one native speaker of a language other than English. The languages chosen reflected those in the community. After the reading, participants discussed the book, shared connections to the book, and often shared pieces of their own life stories. At the end of the event, every family took home a copy of the book from that evening.

During these events, other families from the community that were at the library for a different reason began joining in the story sharing. These mostly native-English-speaking families became regulars at the monthly events and began building relationships with the immigrant families. The stories provided an opening for families from different language and cultural backgrounds to get to know one another.

During the last event of the year, other community organizations that had been looking for ways to interact with immigrant families in the community joined in to inform families of available community services, such as health and wellness and discounted tax preparation. Through multilingual story sharing, these two educators engaged families and community partners in building new relationships and interconnectedness that enhance the school community.

While these ideas offer great potential for creating more supportive learning environments for ELLs and more inclusive school communities, we acknowledge the challenges, or perceived challenges, that teachers may face in engaging with IR families. The educator

participants in our research needed time and space for developing their ideas, and perhaps more importantly, they needed to be nudged to take risks in order to advocate for change in the approaches their schools implemented with families. The educators noted fears about language and cultural differences and how they would communicate with and relate to IR families.

We were able to encourage the teachers to engage with families by emphasizing the excitement of being innovative and serving as change agents in their communities. Perhaps the most compelling rationale for teachers, though, was the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with students and their families.

### Imagining the Possibilities

Families want to be a part of the school and community, and schools have the responsibility to create time, spaces, and structures for families to engage in relationship-building opportunities that facilitate knowledge of how to support their children's education and how education systems work. Intentional opportunities for collaborative family engagement also teach educators how to be more supportive of families and how to facilitate global awareness for all learners.

A collaborative family engagement approach offers educators the opportunity to create authentic, linguistically and culturally sustaining spaces for ELLs, their families, and their communities. The IR families we interviewed made a compelling case for why educators' efforts to engage families must begin with and be centered on families. What if family engagement efforts began by listening to families' stories and by asking families what they need, what they want, what they want to offer, and what they imagine for their children?

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### Note

<sup>1</sup> All living room conversation materials are open source and available at <https://www.livingroomconversations.org/>

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