

Where Do We Go From Here in Family Engagement? Comments At the Late Turn of the 21st Century

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect upon several concerns related to parent engagement policies and laws affecting school-home relationships and end with describing the challenges of effective practices among teachers of diverse families mostly new immigrants and refugees, specifically those utilizing intercultural liaisons. In so doing, I briefly trace and problematize some of the history of policies and research in home-school-community partnership(s). I draw on strong examples from practice—both that from my own ethnographic research, insights from teaching about family engagement with pre-service and in-service teachers and then also from work I’ve seen taking place internationally and described by other practitioners in both the U.K. and in the U.S.

Policies & Research in Home-School Relations and Parent Engagement

I begin this paper by tracing policies to moments in time of their initial research and then again back to practice and forward again to policies and research so that I can frame an argument for what is *often missing* and *why* in the public imagination and practical skill set of practitioners at this, nearly fifteen years into the turn of the century. Although others may disagree—I believe that public policies about families have much to do with the nature of practice because what teachers and parents interpret they “and others, *should be doing*” on behalf of families in school is because of the ways laws and policies are written and the types of research upon which they are based. Consider the law No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its embedded but important focal points related to family engagement.

What is implicit in, and at the heart of this contemporary law and struggle and *pressure* to ensure that parents are engaged with schooling on behalf of individual students is the construct of *diversity*, which is most often used to denote people of color, people of language minority status, and/or people whose mother tongue is not standard

dialects of English. When scholars, researchers, teachers, and families *themselves* recognize that diversity is understood only in relation to the powerful in society, including the practices and habits of mainstream, well-educated, dominant, mostly European-Americans then we can begin to intellectually grapple with the complexity of practice around family involvement in today's schools, including the laws that have arisen based upon positivist constructs of social science. For at the heart of the law is a largely unacknowledged cultural model of the dominant peoples in US society for whom schooling is a natural practice or easy fit. Likewise, it is well-educated, dominant mainstream Americans who are easily able to achieve that which laws and policies have been able to articulate. More fully, however, it is the less powerful "other" individuals, those in poverty, those of minority language or cultural standing, for whom laws and policies have been written.

Let's consider the law No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and know that before NCLB was the Educate America Act (National Education Goals Panel, 2000). Both laws emphasized the importance of *schools in increasing parent involvement to build academically successful schools*. Specifically, NCLB has a number of "clauses" that are very much based upon the main findings of a group of researchers whose work was prominent emerging in the late 1980s and into the 1990s and spanning into the early part of this century (Booth & Dunn, 1996; Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Epstein, 1986; Epstein, 2011, p. 46; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998).

(Table 1 about here)

It is important to note, that public laws about family engagement are built upon mostly larger scale studies that *associate* parental behaviors with particular kinds of actions and academic results for children (Epstein, 1986; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). Additionally, know that many of these studies are fair minded, well-designed around and thoughtfully analyzed for issues of social-class and ethnicity, leading us to know that many very low income parents believe their involvement matters and they have strategies at their disposal to support their involvement in school life (Drummond & Stypek, 2004; Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, Epstein, 1995; Thompson, 2003). Parents also adjust their aspirations based upon access to long-term educational opportunities associated with their racial backgrounds, social context, child's age and gender and beliefs in their own confidence and teaching efficacy (Wentzel, 1998). Many additional study findings, which were also important but not visible in the writing or design of public laws and policies; however, show that aspects of common parent involvement strategies are advantaged toward higher income people, affording them access to social networks that help to understand and shape schools to their children's advantage, better advocacy skills for their children when they are struggling, and/or access to additional resources beyond school's walls to enhance their children's experiences (Bowers & Griffin, 2011; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Jones, 2007). Research reflecting school leadership is particularly fraught with the tensions of managing and taking advantage of dominant parent group's power while arguing for and supporting minority families (Kroeger, 2007; Lareau & Muñoz, 2012). Additionally, some large scale studies have found that even when low-income, African American and Hispanic parents report similar parent involvement to their mainstream counterparts (homework help, conveying high aspirations, monitoring assignments, advocating) the effects of these strategies are moderated by demographic features such as race and social

class (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In other words, Parent Teacher Association involvement, monitoring and supporting had more beneficial effects on European Americans than African Americans or Hispanics and Asian American students, low-SES and single parent households (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Because the balance of power in social science of this era—which some have called human capital or neo-liberal—is heavily weighted toward positivism instead of interpretivism, the many ways of living life as diverse families often don't fit well in schools' expectations and are also likely less understood both in public imagination and pre- and in-service education of teachers. Because of the ways in which research findings differentially make their way into policies, those studies that run counter to mainstream thinking aren't given much attention.

Many well-regarded ethnographic portraits of families' lives, as further examples reveal substantial social patterns of the ways parent engagement is culturally bound, explaining parent action within powerful encounters either “miss understood” or “missed” by schools altogether (Valdes, 1996; Lareau, 2000; Rogers, 2003; Rosier, 2000). Such studies show the complexity of human beings, subjugating the easily counted constructs of communicating, volunteering, attending events, learning at home, receiving advice about parenting, or decision making and collaboration to socio-cultural or critical framing. The critical renditions of parent-teacher relations posed as a counter-voice to what has become public law are lesser understood, less privileged, and absent in the knowledge base of most of the public's imagination, and also likely missing in many teacher training institutions.

Despite these facts, it is very clear that the call to support family engagement is directed at everyone, but its purposes in narrowing the achievement gap for poor and minority children is explicit (Mapp, p. 5-7, in Belway, Durán, & Spielberg, n.d.). As a researcher, in my work in urban and poor settings, I notice that minority children's families are involved and engaged with their children's lives, but it is often harder for their teachers to find effective strategies when working with them *if* their thinking is only centered around the framework provided by Epstein's Typology (Kroeger & Lash, 2011). Like the school people in Lareau's work, teachers often expect families to demonstrate concerted cultivation activities on behalf of children from low economic classes much like their middle class and professional community members (2003). Moreover, I have found that working beyond the typology into culturally relevant pedagogy or funds of knowledge frameworks may be a more useful pedagogic approach for harder to reach families and can change classroom dynamics for children (Kroeger, 2014). Because of the ways in which standards and test-scores are now driving teachers' decision making, I believe social policies' impacts on schools have created a near perfect cauldron in the U.S. for ignoring or down-playing the differences of socio-cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic qualities of family life altogether. Yet, in practice, it is those very real differences that can be interpreted culturally by school people and used strategically by school people to help understand, modify for, and motivate families. Increasing parent engagement by adapting to differences in family life due to economic standing, language practice, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, racial and family make-up and national origin may be one of the most useful strategies around which teachers should continue to modify their approaches to engage families.

As I reviewed and analyzed an important and helpful reference guide published by the National Parent Teacher Association (Belway, Durán, & Spielberg, n.d.) it

appeared that in response to federal law, many recent state laws have arisen in response to NCLB. State laws on family engagement seem to be designed to assist or strengthen local input and control of individual school districts, improve school and family communications, and/or support the creation of additional supports at multiple levels of educational decision making to strengthen family engagement. (p. 9). Such state policy measures appear to be infrastructural supports to assist local governments to heighten accountability and provide requirements for developing and implementing better practices on the part of public schools.

Additionally, in the United States, states have interpreted their roles toward supporting family engagement in schools in a whole host of ways. Over 40 states have enacted laws directed at school districts, boards of education, and individual schools to implement involvement policies—some are directed at schools and others at parents. Sanctions, including the withholding of state funds and/or forbidding approval of operating budgets, are common in districts that fail to prioritize parent involvement in either actions or budgetary processes. Likewise, in many states sanctions on parents themselves can be instituted when they fail to attend conferences or when their own children are found truant. Thirty one of the states in the U.S. have legislated programs targeting low-income populations and only sixteen offer protections to parents when asking for time off of work to attend school functions (Belway, Durán, & Spielberg, n.d.).

I find it curious that state policies and laws have quite a lot of information about how *parents* should be engaged with schools and how schools should involve families, including such things as ensuring families serving on *advisory councils* but only *one* state (Minnesota) prioritizes the importance of equitable representation by *race*, for example, on those advisory councils, and “must consider the district’s demographic diversity and barriers to parent involvement when developing its recommendations (p. 78, Belway, Durán, & Spielberg n.d.). Likewise, the majority of the states in the U.S. have enacted laws calling for *expanding* family engagement opportunities and these largely call for educators and families to work as *partners* on behalf of students; however, only one state’s policies (South Carolina) had a clause in which training programs for educators were to be explicitly “responsive to racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity” of its population (p. 100, Belway, Durán, & Spielberg n.d.).

What is troubling are the ways in which mainstream discourses (in federal and state mandates) downplay the power structures of schools, for surely if knowledge from interpretive research was wide-spread, more than two U.S. states would acknowledge the tremendous complexity of family engagement/parent involvement by prioritizing socio-economic, racial or linguistic difference in local practice. By tracing the origins of policy to research and seeing the influence of policy on public thought, one can begin to deconstruct the complicated nature of how practice is interpreted through state and local mandates. While mandates are important, I believe more that knowing and understanding the lives of families and acting far beyond mandates, the law, or frameworks will strengthen the life course of individual students.

Toward that end, I turn my attention to the particular needs of today’s immigrant and new-comer populations. We have a continuing need to modify schools and our practices to *adapt to* rather than resist the challenges and struggles families bring. Developing practices in the hope of training minority families to be like the mainstream in this country is a project that would take generations; it cannot be done nor should be

done through the development and delivery of one generation of programs or series of programs in our schools.

English Language Learners & Immigrants: The Use of Interpreters in Hmong-American Experience

Consider an example from my own research and notice the ways in which one immigrant/refugee parent acted on behalf of his child in school. I conducted an interpretive ethnographic study which took place just as the mandates of the Educate American Act and the force of Epstein's model of community partnership had already captured the attention of policy makers. In observing and trying to understand the motivations of Mr. Qhoua Vue, a second-generation Hmong refugee father, I observed one time per week for a year encompassing his son's entire first grade and part of his second grade experiences. In doing this work, I gained a fuller sense of the life history of the Hmong people as well as his son's developmental history and challenges and successes in school.

Additionally, because my purpose in that study was to determine the ways in which diverse families framed their own participation in schools—I was particularly interested in how families partook of their schools' offerings of parent engagement. To that end, I observed and interviewed Jimmy Ly's parents and those who worked with his parents throughout the timeframe, observing all they did on behalf of their child, and asking questions to understand how his parents understood their involvement roles. Drawing upon that research portrait here, I highlight the many ways in which Mr. Vue participated in his son's school—serving as a volunteer, attending conferences, communicating with his son's teacher and receiving and responding to communications from his child's school in concert with the mandates of public policy and recommendations. Here are some aspects of what I learned.

In communicating, regular, meaningful, two-way communication was achieved through the support of a Building Resource Instructional Support (BRIS) personnel member, Mr. Kham Thee Vue, who served the school's Hmong-American Refugee population, some of whom (including Jimmy Ly's father) were second generation citizens of the US, having come from Laos after the Vietnam War. About 20% of the elementary school's 350 children's Kindergarten through 3rd grade population was Hmong, but at the district level almost 65% of Hmong students were dropping out prior to high school graduation.

During the study year, all interactions with Jimmy Ly's teacher to his parents filtered through Mr. Kham Thee, one of several temporary staff hired by the school to circumvent cultural miscommunications and/or enhance family engagement. Kham Thee translated all written communications on behalf of Jimmy Ly's teacher (and many to other families on behalf of other classrooms), but the interactions from school to home were more appropriate and responsive to families' needs via the telephone or stops to the apartment building where Kham Thee could speak directly to Jimmy Ly's father. This "voice to voice" style was used to confirm appointments, discuss problems, or arrange activities with the father. This laborious practice was personal and reliable and it netted an ongoing interaction with Jimmy Ly's father and his classroom teacher. Kham Thee spoke of the appropriate communication:

My approach is to contact in oral language instead of written. Oral is personal. You are speaking face-to-face or voice-to-voice. I say, your boy, Jimmy Ly forgot his permission slip for Mrs. Spencer, and I need it.... “You go ahead and sign it in my place, and I give you oral permission, ok”... I am trusted.

Though the school had call-in lines established for homework and other announcements, the better approach was always through a translator, who was preferably male, and communicated to the father, to reinforce the gendered communication style of the ethnic group in which the male member of the household was the communicator of most things public and the female was the provider of most things domestic. The father confirmed that Kham Thee’s role was essential:

There are examples of ways that he has been helping me. Sometimes he translates the school newsletters from English to Hmong. He has been very helpful when he comes back home to check on the kids. The telephone call has been special to me. If he has time, he would come directly from the school to my home to talk.

Much like the clauses of NCLB’s effective outreach, the BRIS’s main role was one of conveying expectations; but, the classroom teacher also conveyed expectations in the form of literacy training. Mrs. Spencer did a fair amount of literacy coaching during conferences, demonstrated a book walk, managed literacy-related materials, demonstrated phonemic word play, and instructed Mr. Vue to read with Jimmy Ly. She expected him to listen to Jimmy Ly read daily and to provide opportunities for him to do so with other family members with take-home materials. Because Jimmy Ly was not Mr. Vue’s first child (he was the 11th of 12 children), she quickly surmised that he knew all of the strategies she shared. She complimented Mr. Vue on the many literacy and language strategies he demonstrated in their first fall conference of the year.

The role of teaching refugee and immigrants a new way of “living education” in keeping with NCLB came out as the BRIS member conveying his expectations for Mr. Vue, Jimmy Ly’s father. Kham Thee Vue explained:

When it comes to the behavior of parents, they have to realize that their road is expanded, and they have to do their part. ...Not only do I cover education, but I also emphasize strongly that parents have to do their part. ... When we call them, we don’t just set up times, but we explain the benefits of why they must come to the conference, the reasons why they must participate in their child’s education, no matter how small it is.

While Mrs. Spencer acknowledged that Jimmy Ly was officially “behind” by the second conference of his first grade year in literacy and writing, it was not so in mathematical knowledge. His BRIS went onto explain:

We are the explainers and the emphasizeers, not just plain communicators. We see those who lag behind when it comes to taking responsibility at home. ... We explain that the teacher has lots of other kids. We line it up, so that even if they do it, they see it, and they have a part there too. They must live education.

Learning about Mr. Qhoua Vue over the course of a full year and a half of experiences in his son’s school, he described his own early life as a child whose father and grandfather were recruited into serving for the U.S. CIA during the Vietnam war; as a teenager, he would have been educated in refugee camps for at least five years before

coming to the U.S.. He married his wife at the age of 18, and then followed his father and cousins to the US, settling in the same city that Jimmy Ly was born.

Mr. Vue did not explain directly that many other factors beyond a brief formal primary school experience would have interrupted his ability to support his son's school as the more dominant Americans would have. For example, I learned in my research that elements of fact, such as the Hmong "preliterate culture" (the language having only first been written down in the 1950s); his stressful refugee transition, welfare status, large number of children, and perhaps significant differences from many Americans in religious practices (the Vues were Animist rather than Christian); as well as disciplinary standards, all influenced Mr. Vue's relationship with his child's school.

Mr. Vue's goals for his children were to see that all of his children, including his daughters, attended high school and graduated from college, if they desired to do so. He spoke of "no welfare," only working and providing. His means of doing so, however, were not that of a typical adult child scaffold in the realm of literacy. Mr. Vue relied upon his older sons and daughters to support Jimmy Ly in reading. He stated:

The olders help the youngers in subjects such as math and they will say, "This is how she taught us, and then the olders, my daughter that lives in Jimmy Ly's house, she is 10 (third grade). She helps Jimmy Ly.

As a researcher, I was delighted at how much I had learned about Mr. Vue, and the many engagement roles he did play with his son. Many of these roles were due to the explicit connection between Mr. Vue and the cultural liaison, created by the temporary position established by funding priorities of the school. I and his teacher noted during the study year, when Jimmy Ly's father attended and participated at a large community event to determine school boundary changes, he spoke at a large parent meeting, and he or his wife came to the welcoming conference for all families. Additionally, one or both parents attended the fall and spring parent teacher conferences as well as a specific Reading Recovery Program orientation for families in the spring—for which Jimmy Ly was selected. Mr. Vue and his wife also demonstrated traditional dress and songs for Hmong people at a school-wide market day celebration called a "Fashion Show" (that all children in the school attended), as well as the final late spring performance in his son's class, both at the special request of Kham Thee Vue. One event that Mr. Vue and his wife did not attend, the Author's Tea, would have called attention to what he lacked, a strong written English language ability.

The Evolution of Parents' Perspectives: Omissions in Practice

By sharing this case, my points are that the school was doing all that was required or mandated very much in line with Epstein's typology (communication, event attendance, homework support, getting parenting support at home, teaching parent's about school's expectations) or federal and state law might entail. What I was surprised by in my work were the many times when Hmong history and culture were not incorporated into school life—after all, a high percentage of students in the district were Hmong, and teachers had 20 years or more of practice with this stable and permanent ethnic group. The pre-literate culture was an interesting one, and visual, musical and oral story-telling would have been a logical jumping off point for written and read English experiences. Unlike the *title* Building Resource Instructional Support might entail, I only

once saw Kham Thee Vue in the classroom supporting instructional practices with first language adaptation. Spencer's insights about the Hmong were accurate, and she grouped Jimmy Ly with another Hmong student, but her spoken knowledge of the Hmong didn't net any other visible changes in her approaches to classroom instruction.

Even if appropriate and culturally relevant adaptations were made, this does not change other facts: Mr. Vue's refugee camp education and linguistic patterns were less valued or unrecognized by the majority and largely ignored in the larger community (the Hmong community repeatedly asked for Hmong language support in the schools without result). The Hmong were entitled to reparations in the US, having served in the "secret war" in Vietnam, Laos and parts of Cambodia. Many eventually settled in refugee camps like hundreds of thousands of other Hmong in Thailand (Pfaff, 1995) moving in secondary migrations to various parts of North America. Yet many first generation Hmong (in the community I studied) remained in poverty due to welfare assistance. Over time, it appeared to me, and was demonstrated by comments from staff, that some Hmong were increasingly distancing themselves from schools—and that this group's identity was somehow further from North American interests.

Mr. Vue did what he saw as his best to help his son with homework and did much of what the school asked. What may be more important however, are the ways in which Mr. Vue came to see his own goals and motives for his child and his family's education and financial future. He learned from his interactions and encounters with school (with his many children, several were identified for special education services and/or behavioral interventions) and this affected his own sense of efficacy on behalf of Jimmy Ly. Mr. Vue's own perspective on why Hmong children were not doing as well as their mainstream counterparts in the end came down to one very important thing. Mr. Vue stated "We are not as educated as American families. We do not have education."

Such a detailed case tells us what parents and schools are capable of, but are not necessarily doing, as well as what we should be more mindful or cautious about in our frameworks for them and what our frameworks teach the "others" in society. Surely, a belief of "not being educated enough" on behalf of his children is not what the school would have wished for Mr. Vue (or others like him) to learn over time through their everyday encounters. As an active and engaged parent, his self-efficacy was affected. The impact his involvement would have on his son Jimmy Ly's first grade of school couldn't be measured by his child's grades alone—but also by a framing of what he was learning about himself as a parent within these ongoing encounters. Though he had hopes for all of his children, the engagement that was created between himself and the school over the lifetime of his own parenting as an immigrant and former refugee did not increase as a result of ongoing encounters, but rather was a continuously sought-after and hard-won encounter between himself and school people. When asked about some school events (a spring time play for example) Mr. Vue stated that "they didn't seem all that important". Nonetheless he did attend.

Time spent in conferencing with school literacy practice(s) taught and confirmed that some adults listened to Jimmy Ly reading (older brothers, father, mainstream teacher in balanced literacy groups, myself). Largely absent, however, in the classroom and school were even brief language and literacy practice(s) from home (to modify the learning environment), and absent or un-noteworthy in the everyday use of the building resource instructional time was Hmong cultural advocacy toward mainstream teachers,

children and families on behalf of this group. What was still missing in early years curriculum was relevant, age-appropriate, taught social studies history of this sub-group's relation to American culture.

Insights From Refugee & Immigrant Perspectives

Using Mr. Vue's example, I believe what is often still missing in the practice of teaching and community engagement is an intra-personal insight and as well as a willingness of an *ethical* sort to go out on a limb pedagogically. This is both an intellectual skill and an emotional generosity on behalf of these families and children.

Mrs. Spencer was warm and caring to Jimmy Ly and Mr. Vue; she often pushed Kham Thee to insist that the father attend lesser motivating events (like the spring parent-teacher conference and the end of year celebration). She also exclaimed that "when you know a horse will get beaten you don't beat it to get it ready" when expressing how much she would push the limits of Jimmy Ly's capacity as a reader, writer and speaker. But, having known more or less of the refugee history, (which may or may not have included the U.S. dependence and destruction of the Hmong way of life after the Vietnam War), I wondered how often or if school people could have taken advantage of curriculum changes to meet Jimmy Ly and Mr. Vue where they were. What if the Hmong Pa'ndau story quilts had been used as literate texts to other American folk arts? These quilts that first generation Hmong women made could have easily bridged aspects of community and were not unlike mainstream American folk art quilts which hung upon library and entrance hallways of the school and were created by generations of other American moms at Jimmy Ly's school. Could the old stories about Hmong culture and life have been a story telling device in Mrs. Spencer's classroom? Or, was there another way to frame for Mr. Vue (and other Hmong Americans) the connection to education, history, and that of his son's school?

Skill sets of adapting curriculum is sometimes *learned by doing* or sometimes *known by being* but is a skill that allows a teacher to be an action oriented individual with an ethos of an extra-personal sort. Teachers who teach across cultural divides seem to have personal qualities and an intra-personal affect that influences the way she thinks and what she does about family engagement. I believe, that this more elusive skill set of *being effective* often means giving parents the benefit of the doubt in situations where others would be quick to judge or blame (as Mrs. Spencer did) but also never allows the teacher to let herself off the hook of responsibility to act in a manner that gets the most out of parent-teacher encounters, however difficult they may seem. It is unclear to me if Mrs. Spencer would have done different kinds of parent engagement or curriculum planning (involving Hmong culture) if she'd have moved beyond that which is mandated: conferencing, communicating, homework, event attendance, and parenting supports; nonetheless, in her own conversations with me, she wondered if she'd somehow "let Mr. Vue off the hook" by not making him do more.

Elsewhere, I (and others) have argued for "inquiry" to guide our work with families (Kroeger & Lash, 2011; Kroeger & Myers, 2013). Researchers in intercultural studies for example have articulated the vast social divide between teachers (who are mostly White and middle class) and that of their students, who in the next 50 years will become more racially, linguistically, and economically diverse, and argue for more

culturally robust skills for educators (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2014). Because no teacher will have all of the social qualities allowing them to identify with or understand the backgrounds of the families of all the children in their classroom, it is now more important than ever to take an inquiry-based stance in our family-based involvement responsibilities. Often those teachers and schools that are good at parent engagement regardless of the difference or difficulty of the child's circumstance seem to be especially good at capitalizing upon what they find and framing their way of looking at family involvement regardless of the child's life circumstance(s) (Pushor, 2010; Rieger, 2008).

In the next section of this paper I will give several more instances from practice, first from the U.K. and then the U.S., of ways in which particular centers and school workers in early years settings have chosen to interpret and act upon parent engagement.

Innovation and Home-Visits with New Immigrants in the UK

When Americans think of diversity and parent engagement we rarely look to the practice of our international neighbors for innovation. But, as our globally interdependent nation evolves with other nations, and as our economies and socio-political boundaries intersect, we can't continue to look at immigrant populations as individuals to be assimilated; there is too much at stake to do so (Fortuny, Hernandez & Chaudry, 2010). Instead, as Americans, we will have to continually adapt and recognize how our varied immigration patterns will change more quickly in schools and how we might change our practices in relation to demographic shifts that wars, military occupations & political crises, as well as economic interdependence and social remittance with others, can bring (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). Such a stance requires teachers to move well beyond a parent-training/parent-education mentality.

With the social and economic challenges of globalization, some innovation can be mirrored in internationalizing our curriculum more fully and in adapting our parent-teacher processes. Home visits, which help individuals understand each other, like those designed at the de Lissa & Belgravia Centre in Birmingham, England, for example, could be drawn upon (Kroeger, Vance, Sisson, & Froggatt, in press). Immigrant newcomers to our communities will continually be a source of challenge, and yet to support them, strong teachers and centers for young children will treat families as experts about their own children and go to them with questions before answers, convincing the family that their customs, values, and norms will be understood by school staff (Ginsberg, 2007; NAEYC, 2009).

Because language communities are becoming increasingly intertwined, family support staff must recognize (as I saw modeled at the de Lissa Centre) that first language acquisition in the mother tongue is essential, and the home is the most important starting place for cognitive development and eventual cultural and intra-cultural competence. Because of this, part of the school's role is to convey to families the importance of the child's mother tongue, allowing the child some emotional, cognitive, and, when possible, linguistic tie to the home language while at school (NAEYC, 2009). Employing staff and teachers who speak the languages of the newcomers within their classrooms is a very important first step in convincing families of the importance of their language practices. Keeping children who speak similar languages in small and large instructional groups is

another. Allowing children everyday access to their language customs is also important, and in North America, we have very few settings in which dual-languages or simultaneous languages are being heard, let alone being taught but, just because we've adopted a dominant language culture does not mean this is right. In the present, it has become increasingly important for globally competent individuals to be able to communicate across broad social groups (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011).

The de Lissa Centre in Birmingham, England, for example, has a home-visiting staff proficient in many of the foreign languages of their communities. Securing paid staff supports for families of immigrants is part of superior family engagement and allows dual languages to be used as an asset, and a first step, in adapting to school life in relation to family life (NAEYC, 2009). Environmental print in Arabic, Bengali, Turkish, French, Punjabi, Urdu, Chinese, Somali, Gujarati, Portuguese, Spanish, the language of families, was ever present in hallways, classrooms, literacy centers, and parent meeting rooms. Literacy centers and reading materials in classrooms reflected the customs of groups—showing children's literature with relevant themes in religious expression, celebrations, and family life. Noteworthy in this school, in addition to a welcoming desk at the entrance, was an employment and resource room replete with community job postings, associated health and wellness resources (nutrition, mental health information), and a small but visible cadre of parent volunteers to manage the organization of spaces for parents. Whereas a common practice in the U.S. is for school staff to determine the direction and scope of parent engagement meetings—families and parents at the de Lissa Centre determine the subject of parent engagement meetings (at the time of my observation: smoking cessation, fatherhood, and eating right at home).

Additionally, at the Centre, one month before school started, early childhood teachers used home visits (facilitated by liaisons) as a rapport-building strategy. Classroom bulletin boards with pictures of families and children documented an emphasis upon rapport building. Home visits allowed them and other staff to support the health and safety of children and take steps to inquire about children's educational needs during visits (Kroeger, Vance, Sisson, & Froggatt, in press). Such actions helped to ensure that parents have access to health care, financial supports for nutrition and safety in their homes, as well as emotional and physical ties to others in their new communities as they come to school. While the U.K. has a similar law to NCLB, it is the local interpretation of the U.K.'s Educational Act of 2002 (Peach, 2014) and the guiding philosophy of practitioners that matters to particular families and has shaped the nature of the directions their Centre practices have taken.

Gathering Immigrant Parents' Perspectives in Home Visits: Insights from Teresa Mendéz Bray

I found it incredibly important to see if my own researched insights about immigrant and refugee experiences resonated with other aspects of the field in the U.S. Having researched in elementary schools and gained insights from the Centre in the U.K., I turned my thoughts toward speaking with and interviewing a long-time colleague who has practiced in elementary schools as a multi-lingual coordinator for Early Childhood Education, but who is currently supporting immigrants and newcomer families as a bilingual speech and language therapist. NCLB raises the stakes for children of

immigrant and refugee communities (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Herwantoro, Zimmerman & Passel, 2004), but public laws and state policies do not ask us to fully consider and understand the home culture of the child when teaching, despite the fact that our learned societies articulate that this is, and should continue to be, a high priority (NAEYC, 2009).

Teresa Mendéz Bray has been a long time supporter of immigrants and refugees and her roles on teaching teams have focused especially on bilingual support services. Ms. Mendéz Bray serves on teams at the elementary and middle schools, and her primary focus in her work with families has always been to conduct home visits for language and cultural interviews, and to listen to families on behalf of their students to support teachers in understanding what they are seeing with immigrant students. While she has worked in all ranges of age, including pre-school, elementary, and secondary education, she shared with me some perspectives on listening, utilizing cultural liaisons in home visits, and finally some insights about how teachers commonly respond to information from homes of cultural newcomers. Mendéz Bray holds multiple licensures and has earned a certificate for advanced study in Curriculum and Instruction and has conducted her own early research related to Muslim mothers' use of language with English language learners. Additionally, she has spent a good deal of her professional life training others. Mendéz Bray has lead workshops and taught other cultural liaisons and speech therapists (working with second language groups).

In the U.S., response-to-intervention (RTI) is a common strategy in which educators, specialists, school staff, and parents meet on behalf of students who are being referred for special education evaluation. Since immigrant children are more likely to struggle with academic content than their mainstream counterparts, and immigrants themselves are likely to be economically disadvantaged and experience challenging circumstances both in school and in their communities or homes (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Herwantoro, Zimmerman & Passel, 2004), Teresa Mendéz Bray's work as a bilingual speech therapist and former multi-lingual coordinator has been essential. Currently, Mrs. Mendéz Bray is working in the Midwest in a large city of about 250,000. Her community attracts many groups of Latino, Asian, Middle-Eastern, and an increasing number of African new-comer families. Mendéz Bray is often in a role of family and student advocacy as she conducts home visits with parents and children. Her priorities of observing, asking questions, and listening are important.

According to Mendéz Bray, perfecting a listening stance during home-visits requires both the home visitor and the liaison to suspend judgment or meaning making until after the home visit has been conducted. Mendéz Bray conveys that listening is the most fruitful stance because parents from other cultures and nations do not always interact with school staff or on behalf of their children in the same way as mainstream Americans. Listening can entail probing with questions, but not defending or explaining the perspective of the school, as doing so might shut down opportunities for the home-visitor to learn. Listening is also essential to understanding how the parent views the child's skills, and its use undercuts the common dynamics of one-way transmission of conversation that commonly happens in school culture in conferencing and other types of event construction (Kroeger & Lash, 2011).

If the home-visitor is not familiar with the newcomer culture, cultural liaisons are crucial. Cultural liaisons can be helpful because they allow the visitor to frame his/her questions appropriately, interpret observations more accurately, and /or guide the order of

the home visit in order to ensure rapport and productive conversations have been established correctly for that particular cultural or ethnic group. Though Mendéz Bray's visits have commonly occurred when teachers do not understand their students, some of the perspectives she raises should be applied for teachers who have a need to perfect home-visiting strategies with their newcomer families and cultural liaisons.

The importance of the right cultural liaison for the ethnic group is also essential. In her work with Vietnamese and Guatemalan families, for example, Mendéz Bray found it essential to secure the support of a female liaison that spoke and understood the culture of the home. Securing women's help allowed the mothers in the home to enter the conversation and speak as the child's central caretaker rather than as a listener. Because during home visits with Guatemalan families and in the past with a Vietnamese family the fathers were at the forefront of conversation when a couple is in the home, Mendéz Bray notes issues of gender and gendered communication patterns. Bringing another woman who is a native speaker allows the mother as a central figure to speak more forthrightly. The right cultural liaison is also crucial because even if one knows the language, he or she may not be able to interpret the culture accurately. Mendéz Bray speaks Spanish (having parents who were Bolivian), but when working with Spanish speakers from different countries, (Guatemala, for example), she'd also secure the use of an appropriate cultural liaison from the appropriate ethnic group. In my own work, I've learned that it is essential to know that speakers might share a "language," but their immigrant experiences, national alliances and/or ethnic ties and group political conflicts may or may not bind them closer. Understanding national histories or potential national or ethnic conflicts between liaisons and parents is essential in home visits.

Though most of Ms. Mendéz Bray's home visits occurred in conjunction with decisions about the possible need for special education services or early intervention or specialized interventions, home visits serve to solve problems within the school setting. Understanding children's home experiences around play, self-help, behavior, language use or loss, and academic content knowledge is crucial for allowing teachers to gain insight into how parents view these qualities as being different from or similar to other children of similar ages or from other cultural groups. Such knowledge allows teachers and other support professionals to gauge their expectations in the classroom as appropriate or inappropriate from a cultural viewpoint, and teachers often turn to Mendéz Bray with questions and the ability to get accurate information.

While in my own research, cultural liaisons were used to support parent engagement and school involvement of immigrant families, most often, Mendéz Bray speaks of their use in informing the RTI process prior to special education referrals for immigrant children. Yet, stories heard during her home visits with immigrant families reveal stories of hope and joy, as well as racism and discriminatory experiences in either the home country and/or the U.S.. Mendéz Bray acknowledged that many families have great insight about why children struggle or approach learning differently at school or appear bored, angry, disengaged, and/or tired as well as happy, cooperative, proud or successful. At times, the role of extended family in home visits can be significant, and allowing families to have a voice in the school life of the child can change the trajectory of the child's schooling in a fruitful way by helping to guide the thinking of teaching teams.

There are also times, after gaining cultural insight, that problem solving or guided insights of others on school teams lead to classroom adjustments for children of immigrant families. While some teachers might frame curriculum adjustments very smartly, altering the classroom structure or using insights to guide instructional design, Mendéz Bray finds (as I did in my own work), that teachers often find home information helpful but don't do much to alter curriculum or their expectations of parents or children with the addition of cultural insights. So while a teacher may learn that one immigrant's child/children potty trained very early, or that another has major child care expectations of younger siblings or kin, or that another child gets himself up, dresses and serves himself breakfast very early and without adult supervision, and find it interesting; teachers might not fully grasp the implications of how development is framed and enacted culturally, leading to differing views of independence, maturation, or expectation on both the part of the child and the parent and thus potentially the school setting.

Examples of successful teacher adaptation and application of information from home-visits are almost always less common than Mendéz Bray wishes but important. While listening to Mendéz Bray speak about Muslim families' writing practices and their relation to the Holy Qur'an for example, one ambitious teacher instituted adapted writing experiences in the classroom. Arabic practice of letter writing within lines is disciplined and its' meaning is tied to religious scripture. Allowing the child to practice Arabic alongside traditional writing instruction in her classroom showed that she valued and respected the child's culture and bridged similar strategies of writing practice in Anglo-American script. Mendéz Bray later learned that this resourceful teacher allowed and created audio-story taping of Arabic language for this child in her room. The teacher's individual study further led her to learn about Muslim celebrations and their meanings, and she supported classroom postings to recognize those forms of culture. On another home-visit, Mendéz Bray learned that a Vietnamese mother valued written texts published in Vietnam (and read the stories silently), then retold them orally with her children. Such types of information could inform classroom teachers to see that their own practices of "read aloud" experiences in the classroom could be modified to a "talk aloud" style to gain the interest and bridge the language gap for this small but important learning group. Such modifications seem slight but paired with home visits of a strategic nature could be one of many types of strategies to elevate home-school-community involvement leading to appropriate engagement by families of immigrant children.

Conclusions and Implications

I began this article by calling attention to the origins of U.S. policy on family partnerships as an historical outcome of social science with ties to mostly positivist scientific genres of research. While our current common-sense understanding of how parent engagement influences school success seems almost unquestionable or infallible, with communication, event attendance, homework support, advocacy, and the receiving of parenting advice at its center, counter-forms of interpretive and ethnographic research provide lesser-known but nonetheless important nuanced critiques of how that same policy and practice operates somewhat differentially for marginalized groups.

Sharing and analyzing a detailed summary of one Hmong American immigrant and refugee father's experience with his school's Building Resource Instructional

Support staff who acted as a cultural liaison, I hoped to persuade the reader to consider what one parent came to learn in his typical everyday encounters over his lifetime with his many children and his youngest son Jimmy Ly. He learned he was simply not educated enough to do what was often asked by his child's school and this may have decreased and shifted his motivation to do so despite compliance to the directives of the school. A caveat that I offer is that our common stance of teaching new-comer families how to do parent engagement in U.S. settings is often missing much because we commonly omit relevant social studies, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and arts-based or political background understandings from teachers and students' curriculum opportunities. Likewise, the cultural nuances of development and educational contextual differences between families and schools are often lost in our practices. So, even while our efforts may garner a type of participation from parents long sought after by schools to support children's learning *is gained*; that learning is yet incomplete—and by intentional or practical omissions becomes assimilationist and deficit rather than strengths based.

In the last third of this paper, I compared and contrasted insights and innovations gained from my explorations in the U.K. around home-visits with cultural new-comer families and that with one dedicated professional in the U.S.. I am convinced, similarly to Teresa Mendéz Bray that if teachers, school workers, and other human service professionals do more listening and asking in their delivery of support to students in schools, we would benefit. Utilizing insights from other nations serves to provide us with innovative examples of how Centres for young children might shift. Learning from dedicated professionals also enhances our understanding of listening and adapting some teaching and learning experiences for cultural relevance.

A changed world demands that school people learn to value the social remittances that cultural new-comers bring, and these empowering steps will take every ounce of effort on the part of practitioners as they recognize openings in relational practices when they occur. If we could see that the many omissions for parent engagement by teachers and practitioners are entirely linked to the ways that in which policies are framed and considered in our common sense understandings, we would more fully recognize the intersections of race, socio-economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and language within parent identity. We might also find that what needs more training (or fixing) is not our cultural new-comers (like immigrants and refugees) but rather our very mainstream views of how families are involved in schooling and the limited view of themselves that parents of minority status can also take away within that framework. When diversity is understood as an inclusive concept, making the roles of the most powerful explicit, teachers will have the ability to pay more attention to history and to view developmental differences as cultural differences within reasons rather than deficits. We might also consider using our cultural liaisons in different ways than we currently do. Teachers then might also reconsider parent involvement as an opportunity for their own learning, a valuable opportunity to teach or learn from other members in the community, and thus adjust some of their own understandings of parent engagement.

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Table 1. *Specific subparts of NCLB related to parent engagement/family involvement*

A-7, A-8, A-9 Forms of communications	Focused on improving teaching and learning and where parents and community can intervene and assist in school improvement they are called to do so. Communication is especially highlighted with a focus on providing information in formats and languages that parents can easily understand including written translations and oral if that is not practical
A-10 & A-11 Non- discrimination and building capacity	Accounting for the needs of parents with disability, and there is to be non-discrimination during the implementation of programs, activities, and procedures (national origin, race, color, age, sex, or disability). Written policies and academic assessments are to be written in ways that build school's capacities to include families, and evaluate effectiveness.
C-8, C-9, C-13 Effective outreach	Effective <i>outreach</i> to ELL and LEP families is required—with supports given to parents showing <i>how to be involved</i> in schooling and also how to <i>assist</i> students reaching high levels of achievement and meet student's strengths and needs.
D-9 Parent Training	Other provisions are to make schools responsible for high-quality instruction, and efficient/effective learning environments, while also provide <i>training</i> for what parents are to be responsible for; <i>monitoring</i> school attendance, <i>homework</i> completion, television watching, <i>volunteering</i> in the classroom or school, and <i>participating</i> in decisions.

U.S. Government (2001)