

# **A Community Engaged Framing: Building Successful Community Engagement for Schools and Families of Bilingual Students Through Inquiry**

*Carlas McCauley, Julie Webb, Suzanne Abdelrahim, and Soha Mahmoud-Tabana*

## **Abstract**

This article explores an action-oriented research study designed to provide better understanding of ways to leverage school and community partnership through family engagement, focusing on the development and enactment of an approach to nurture family–school partnerships. Specifically, in partnership with seven school districts, a team of educators employed an inquiry cycle to plan and investigate family engagement efforts focused on emergent bilingual students and their families. This project tested the assumptions regarding engagement and supported school districts in the development of a strategy designed to fit the unique educational and community contexts of each participating school. A qualitative descriptive analysis was employed over a two-year period, during which researchers conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups and used an observation protocol and an artifact review protocol. The inquiry process used helped to guide educators to test their assumptions about engaging bilingual families and to personalize their projects to fit into their unique educational and community contexts. Study participants expressed beliefs that successful family engagement requires a sense of urgency and commitment and, overall, reported high levels of motivation and interest in sustaining and expanding family engagement efforts. This study has implications for how educators plan and implement family engagement strategies and initiatives within emergent bilingual school communities.

Key Words: community engagement, education policy, family engagement, school reform, emergent bilinguals, English Learners

## **Introduction**

In recent years, family engagement has been given a high priority in education; it is considered an important aspect of education reform and a significant component in the effort to improve schools. This importance is underscored by decades of research suggesting that partnerships between schools, families, and communities can improve student learning outcomes (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Farver et al., 2006; Jeynes, 2022; Lee & Bowen, 2006; McWayne et al., 2008; Raikes et al., 2006). Partnership between schools, families, and communities have proven to be particularly important as it pertains to serving students from underserved communities. Emergent bilingual students, in particular, can benefit from such partnerships (Durand, 2011; Jeynes, 2012; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012).

The purpose of this article is to explicate the creation and evaluation of a framework developed by a research team at the University of California Davis involving a two-year project designed to collaborate with schools and districts centering around the engagement of families. The research team used this project as a test case for engaging families of students from underserved communities, testing a framework for engagement by focusing on creating partnerships with families of bilingual students. The approach was designed to support teachers and school leaders in fostering and fortifying family engagement efforts with a specific focus on families of emergent bilingual students. This article begins with an overview of the framework. Next, the article describes the theoretical approach, followed by an explanation of how this approach and the corresponding tools were developed. The article then provides a description of the approach and its components. It continues with a section on the research methods and study design, followed by the results of the study that include the findings determined by the research team through an analysis of data that discovered emerging patterns. A discussion of the conclusions generated based on the findings is next, and finally a section denoting the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research concludes the article.

## **Literature Review**

Along with a shared definition, family engagement calls for educators to be explicit about how families can engage in school (Housel, 2020) using cross-language communication practices (Baker, 2011). Yet, caregivers remain a largely

untapped resource when it comes to improving student learning outcomes for bilingual students (Ishimaru et al., 2016). Emergent bilingual students in particular can benefit from such partnerships (Durand, 2011; Jeynes, 2012; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012). The current study focused on bilingual learners; despite the proven connection of school, family, and communities, this group and their families can be left out of school and district engagement efforts due to institutional barriers and personal biases (Housel, 2020). Many factors can influence bilingual families' engagement in school, including caregivers' perceptions of their own language proficiency (Sibley & Dearing, 2014; Turney & Kao, 2009; Vera et al., 2012) or challenges due to scheduling conflicts, lack of transportation, and childcare needs (Sibley & Dearing, 2014; Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015; Turney & Kao, 2009).

Educators should promote interactions that connect home and school experiences (Alvarez, 2014), build trusting relationships (Shiffman, 2019), and make use of the social networks to which bilingual families belong (Durand, 2011). Feelings of exclusion, frustration, and disrespect can likewise act as barriers to participation (Olivos, 2012; Mapp, 2003; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Vera et al., 2012). Families that belong to nondominant groups in the community can feel marginalized by the education system (Housel, 2020; Vera et al., 2012) and report finding it challenging to support their children with schoolwork (Alvarez, 2014). Additionally, some bilingual families may have differing perspectives about what it means to engage in their child's education (Kim, 2009). For example, a U.S.-born family may feel comfortable advocating for the learning needs of their child, yet an immigrant family may consider this to be disrespectful to their child's teacher (Housel, 2020; Mapp, 2003; Vera et al., 2012). Educators should strive to establish common ground with families of bilingual students with regard to engagement in school. A shared definition of family engagement is needed for educators and caregivers to establish trusting partnerships to support student learning. Family engagement is a process used to build positive, goal-oriented relationships with families. Effective family engagement is mutually respectful, sustains families' cultures and languages, and includes genuine efforts to understand each family's beliefs, values, and priorities. It is important to note that the term *family* includes the full range of students' households and caregiver structures. The term *engagement* indicates active participation and a power and opportunity balance between educators and caregivers.

The families, schools, and communities that are most effective at supporting student learning have a shared mission and goals around children's learning and development (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Epstein et al., 2019). Home, school, and community contexts represent overlapping spheres of influence,

where educators and families collaborate to maintain engagement (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). These spheres can be influenced by external factors such as educational policies, practices, historical contexts, and developmental conditions, as well as internal factors including communication and social interaction between home, school, and community participants (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). For the present study, the research team also developed a suite of tools that educators can use to engage with families, community members, and colleagues to strengthen partnerships. These interactions can help develop and sustain the social capital that exists among these overlapping spheres and that ultimately serves to support student learning.

Yosso (2013) expands the notion of leveraging social capital to improve outcomes for students by including additional capital termed “community cultural wealth” that is developed and nurtured in communities of color and includes aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. While forms of capital are acquired by individuals, cultural wealth is meant to be shared within a community (Yosso, 2013). The overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein & Sanders, 2000) is a structure in which stakeholders interact, allowing schools to function as a community via the sharing of combined school community wealth to strengthen relationships, maintain communication, and encourage advocacy, all in service of the shared mission of improving student learning.

The research team developed a framework based on research and approached the work through the lens of three key components: communication, advocacy, and relationships. These interrelated components serve as levers to foster student learning. This framing was influenced by Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein & Sanders, 2000) and Yosso’s (2013) community cultural wealth model.

### **Framework Development**

A review of literature around family engagement and existing family engagement frameworks revealed several promising components that had (a) widespread consensus of their importance, (b) a research-based impact on student achievement, and (c) a focus on the needs of bilingual families. In general, currently available frameworks vary in their prioritization of emergent bilingual elementary-aged students and their families, student learning, and feasible suggestions for educators. The research team set forward a design meant to address these gaps and to create a user-friendly approach and a suite of tools for educators to impact family engagement practices in schools.

A unique feature of the research team's approach was the inclusion of translanguaging. Translanguaging is the "process of making meaning, shaping experiences, [and] gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages" (Baker, 2011, p. 288). Beyond basic translation services for parents, the research team approached translanguaging as a method for establishing family–school partnerships, including students' and families' bilingual identities and linguistic resources. Moreover, many other frameworks for family engagement consulted through our review, while providing useful tips for communicating with parents, did not focus explicitly on the role of family engagement in supporting student learning.

### **Framework Components**

The researchers' framing for the project consisted of three key components: communication, advocacy, and relationships. These components interact to foster student learning.

#### *Communication*

We used the term communication based on the research, as schools should clarify and provide different modes of communication in languages families prefer (Breiseth et al., 2011) and develop a system of regular, two-way communication (Halgunseth et al., 2013; Houk, 2005). By communication, we refer to the *sharing and exchanging of information regularly between bilingual students, educators, and families using culturally sensitive and translanguaging practices*. Families can support student success by engaging in regular communication with their child's teacher and school. Communication in multiple languages is a realistic need in many schools, and districts legally must provide translated school information and materials to their school population (Halgunseth et al., 2013). It is also necessary for districts to create a translation and interpretation process including hiring bilingual staff when possible (Breiseth et al., 2011). Additionally, educators should review multilingual accessibility features of any tools they consider for family engagement and ensure teachers and families receive the training necessary to leverage it for maintaining school–family communication across languages.

Technology-based communication tools are of critical concern for school–family communication that engages bilingual families because digital equity is not always achieved. Digital equity includes making sure students and families have equal access to technology, such as hardware, software, and the internet. Access to digital technologies provides families with options that open lines of communication between school and home. However, schools may need to offer training in order for families to successfully utilize digital communication

tools. Schools must also provide ongoing information and communication in a variety of ways beyond digital tools, so families without access to technology can receive the same information.

Establishing personal connections with students and families should be the basis of a school's or district's general communication strategy. Educators should endeavor to establish rapport with caregivers in a welcoming environment and make use of culturally sensitive practices to communicate (Garcia et al., 2016). Additionally, a district's communication strategy should be regularly evaluated, including the identification of current communication strategies, assessment of their effectiveness for cross-cultural communication, and the determination of additional communication strategies that may be needed (Garcia et al., 2016).

### *Advocacy*

Schools and districts can partner with families in more meaningful ways that go beyond traditional roles, thus giving them opportunities to be true advocates. *Family advocacy is a process of engaging bilingual families as key decision makers in shaping activities and programs that promote student learning so that schools value diverse perspectives and shape positive bilingual identities.* A key aspect of family engagement is the empowerment of families to be active participants in the planning process of school decisions where caregivers' ideas are welcomed and valued. Educators should identify the types of decisions that families can make and consider how teachers and schools can elicit and incorporate their input.

School and district teams should be comprised of individuals who reflect the diversity of the district community to help ensure that multiple and diverse voices are represented (California Department of Education [CDE], 2017). Practices such as translanguaging may encourage caregivers to contribute to collective decision making efforts because they can make use of their own and other team members' linguistic resources to improve communication and understanding and to help solve problems (Baker, 2011; Wei, 2018). Additionally, district personnel who have roles in distinct programs, such as English Learner services, Title I intervention, and general and special education, should be included to increase the likelihood that family engagement activities integrate into and across district initiatives (CDE, 2017).

When educators plan family engagement activities they should seek to partner with bilingual families during the planning process (McWayne et al., 2016). When parents help to shape the events and programs that support their students, they will be even more invested in seeing these efforts succeed (Breiseth et al., 2011). Caregivers who are encouraged to participate in advocacy roles can become parent leaders who can shape initiatives that truly reflect the concerns, needs, and values of emergent bilinguals and their families (Warren et

al., 2009) and can recruit and mentor families to engage with the school, thus increasing participation among marginalized groups (Breiseth et al., 2011).

### *Relationships*

Few can argue the importance of establishing relationships between educators, students, and their families. School relationships require establishing connections to build mutual trust and support between bilingual students, educators, and families. Teachers and administrators should have an understanding, and value of, the language, backgrounds, and cultural traditions represented in their school community (Epstein & Salinas, 1992) and receive the necessary training in order to engage diverse families (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Educators must also acknowledge that families will likely require different strategies to engage them in their child's education (Epstein & Salinas, 1992).

In spite of potential barriers, educators can encourage families to engage in their child's educational experience. Teachers and administrators should create a school environment and climate in which all students' families are welcomed (Epstein & Salinas, 1992). Educators should prioritize making connections with individuals who have historically been less engaged on campus to begin to create a bond of trust. Trusting relationships between educators, students, and caregivers can positively impact family engagement by facilitating the recruiting and organizing of families to help and support student learning, both at school and at home (Epstein, 2010). Educators will have established trusting relationships with families when they create partnerships in culturally responsive ways, ensure families feel a sense of belonging at school, and collaboratively coordinate family engagement activities (CDE, 2017). Once positive relationships are built, families feel respected, cared for, and are better able to share their ideas and concerns (Auerbach, 2010), thus reinforcing their value to the community.

### *Engagement in Student Learning*

While student learning is referenced in many other approaches to family engagement, student learning is at the core of the work led by the research team. Communication, advocacy, and relationships should be developed cohesively to work *in service of* student learning. *We view learning as the process of constructing new knowledge and practices by connecting to previous knowledge and practices, building upon family and community ways of knowing and communicating.* It consists of making connections between prior and new knowledge, developing independent and critical thinking, and the ability to transfer knowledge to new and different contexts. The ultimate goal of family engagement is to improve student learning, which may require reflection around current

family engagement practices. This includes reaching beyond traditional family engagement roles, such as volunteering in the classroom, and focusing instead on partnering with families to support student learning.

Family engagement leads to positive benefits for students, caregivers, and schools, including improved academic performance and improved family–teacher relationships. The research literature provides ample evidence that families are rooting for their children to succeed in school, but their engagement can have even greater influence than encouragement alone. Family engagement has been shown to positively impact children’s development in key areas including early literacy (Durand, 2011), language skills (Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Farver, et al., 2006; Raikes et al., 2006), social–emotional skills (Fantuzzo et al., 2004), and academic achievement (Jeynes, 2012; Lee & Bowen, 2006; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; McWayne et al., 2008). In addition, students whose families were involved in school during their elementary years experienced lower dropout rates in high school, were more likely to graduate from high school on time, and had higher grades (Barnard, 2004). Clearly, when strong family engagement is present, the result is increased student achievement.

## **Research Methods and Design**

In order to better understand the complex and context-specific nature of engaging families of underserved students and, in this case, families of bilingual students, the research team developed a framework to assist schools and districts. As researchers, we used a qualitative descriptive analysis methodology in order to reveal patterns across events and experiences and to gain insights from participants’ unique perspectives as they employed the approach outlined by the research team to their local contexts.

### **Context and Participants**

The project was funded through the U.S. Department of Education’s National Professional Development Program. The IRB was sought and approved through the University of California Davis. The study was conducted during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years with participation from educators working in 11 elementary schools across eight school districts in California. Educators were invited to participate by email using various educator networks to distribute the invitations.

The research team wanted to gain insight into how educator teams could use the framework and tools to engage the bilingual families they serve and sought answers to the following research questions:



- Q1: What are educator perceptions about the efficacy of the family engagement practices of their school and/or district?
- Q2: What types of family engagement tools are of greatest value to educators?
- Q3: How are the components of the framework demonstrated in educators' family engagement efforts?
- Q4: How does using the inquiry process to articulate a family engagement strategy influence educator enactment of the framework?
- Q5: What do leaders and their teams need to consider when supporting educators' family engagement efforts?

As a part of the project, during year one, a total of 24 educators (including teachers, principals, and district staff) volunteered to participate between March and June 2021. During year two, a total of 23 educators volunteered to participate. Of the 23, 11 were returning participants, and 12 were new participants. Participants included classroom, intervention, and special education teachers, an English learner program specialist and instructional coach, a principal, a paraeducator, and an English learner assistant. Participants self-selected the professional learning activities in which they engaged and received e-gift cards for their participation. The original plan for professional learning and data collection included a combination of virtual workshops as well as visits to elementary school sites and face-to-face interactions with educator participants. Due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, all interactions between researchers and participants were completed virtually.

During the fall of 2020, the research team developed a suite of online tools for families, teachers, and administrators that align with the core approach to this work. The research team also led six professional learning modules for teachers and one for parents. The modules were developed through additional tools that promote language and literacy development. Topics for the suite of tools align with and promote the framework, including an overview of the research and tools for communication, relationships, advocacy, and student learning. As a part of the process, we conducted a literature review of the research on family engagement, with attention paid to research that focuses on emergent bilingual students, their families, and how schools can best meet their unique needs. Our goal in designing the approach to the work was to fill the gaps in existing frameworks that lack a focus on student learning and emergent bilingual students and families, and to create a user-friendly framework for educators that would drive the design of the tools produced and provide examples to impact family engagement practices in schools. During the spring of 2021, we conducted webinars to train participating educators around the tools and resources that were developed as a part of the project. The project included eliciting feedback on 51 tools for engaging bilingual families. Participants

were unable to test the tools with families during year one of the study due to COVID pandemic restrictions. Therefore, we were not able to collect data on the effectiveness of the tools in practice or gather data on how bilingual families respond to them in year one.

In year two of the study, the research team reengaged year-one participants and recruited additional participants using an interest survey and virtual meetings. Grant participants engaged with researchers and their team of colleagues during the winter and spring of 2022 to implement the framework in their school contexts and test the corresponding family engagement tools. Teams shared their projects and findings and reflected on key learnings in a culminating virtual workshop in spring 2022.

We used an inquiry process as the pathway for testing the implementation of the framework because we believed it would support team collaboration, help participants adopt a curiosity stance that allows for continual discovery, and keep participant motivation levels high. The inquiry process is used across varied disciplines and is gaining in popularity (Pedaste et al., 2015). Although researchers and practitioners differ in the terminology they use to refer to the phases of inquiry that are employed during an inquiry cycle (Pedaste et al., 2015), they generally include a combination of the following non-linear steps that our research team used to guide participating teams:

- Identify baseline data
- Formulate inquiry question
- Apply new strategies
- Revisit inquiry question
- Collect evidence
- Analyze and reflect
- Consider next steps

A discovery process that includes inquiry cycles (Fong, 2020) offers educators a structure for working toward improving family–school partnerships and acts as a guide when they naturally arrive in new and unfamiliar territory. For educators, it can be challenging to step away from the quick pace of instructional decision making and slow down long enough to grapple with important questions about students and their families. The inquiry process prompts educators to pause and contemplate the questions that need to be answered, with considerable time spent formulating the right questions to ask.

The inquiry process allowed participants the opportunity to focus their projects on work that was meaningful to them in their varied school contexts. This approach meant that researchers could observe how the framework and corresponding tools were employed in natural educational settings. The additional benefit of the inquiry process approach is that study participants gain new skills and insights that they can carry forward to new family engagement endeavors.

## **Data Collection**

Our team used various methods to collect data including pre- and post-surveys, focus groups, interviews, an observation protocol, and an artifact review protocol. Surveys were used to collect information about participant perceptions, actions, and beliefs related to bilingual family–school partnerships. Focus groups allowed our team to capture information about perspectives including similarities and differences in viewpoints. Interviews provided an opportunity to gather individual perceptions and reflections. We used an observation protocol to collect information during and after each virtual workshop with participants. An artifact review protocol provided us with the opportunity to review individual team project results.

## **Data Analysis**

Descriptive analysis was used to analyze data across sources since causality was not being evaluated. More specifically, content analysis was used to evaluate patterns in the surveys and artifacts submitted by the participants. The analysis of the surveys included direct quotes from participants, summarizing from interviews, and interpreting data from surveys. Additionally, we considered the frequency of which an idea or statement was shared. Data from all surveys and artifacts were summarized into categories connected with the research questions. Narrative analysis and thematic analysis were used for the focus groups and interviews. Our research team listened to the participants being interviewed as well as examined transcripts of these conversations. Themes were identified from the participants' verbal reflections of their experience using an inquiry cycle process. We triangulated the data from each data collection method and established interrater reliability through independent analyses, then comparison, of the data.

## **Results**

Findings from both the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school year data will be presented in greater detail for each research study question. The results indicate that participants in this study worked in schools that were most effective with the communication component of the framework. Yet, the participants identified limited use of communication tools and strategies that were available to school staff. Moreover, participants reported that their schools and/or districts were more effective with communication and relationship building than with family advocacy. However, all participants noted that the COVID pandemic and virtual learning with their elementary-aged students had a negative impact on communication with families.

**Q1: What are educator perceptions about the efficacy of the family engagement practices of their school and/or district?**

In exploring family engagement in their own school and/or districts, educators shared that they had never participated in professional learning around the topic of family engagement. Despite this, survey participants reported a variety of approaches for engaging bilingual families including holding parent–teacher conferences, hosting family events, making phone calls, sending emails, and distributing newsletters. Many educators noted the importance of translation and interpretation services provided by their schools and/or district and reported making regular use of these resources to connect with bilingual families. Participants reported using technology-based communication tools that prioritize two-way communication between educators and families (including two-way translation features) and believed that determining caregiver communication needs and being trained on using communication tools were important components of their family engagement efforts.

Although translation and interpretation resources are highly valued and frequently utilized, educators reported a need for more staff to translate for families in more languages, and for more opportune translations to satisfy the educators' and families' immediate needs. Participants reported that schools and districts can improve and increase translation and interpretation services by providing educators with access to modern tools and software such as translated robocalls, multilingual texting apps, and video conferencing translation software.

Post-survey reports indicated that participants view relationships as slightly more successful in their schools and/or districts. Educators expressed the importance of building relationships with bilingual families but noted barriers that impeded their efforts, including a lack of access to interpreters for communicating with bilingual families, low attendance of bilingual families at school functions, caregivers' lack of knowledge about and experience with technology use, and limited opportunities to engage in cultural awareness training for staff. Educators shared how they establish relationships with bilingual families by creating a welcoming atmosphere at school and by being active in the community outside of school time. Educators described how they leverage relationships to personally invite caregivers to join school and district committees, thus encouraging engagement and advocacy among bilingual families. Educators also noted that it is important not to make assumptions regarding students and families, nor with family engagement practices.

Educators overwhelmingly reported high levels of confidence in communicating and building relationships with bilingual families. Participants shared that participation in the webinars helped inform their thinking and understanding about family engagement, citing the communication webinar as

particularly valuable. Educators reported that their school could do a better job of engaging families to support student literacy and language learning. Only half of the participants reported that their school uses bilingual family feedback to make improvements.

**Q2: What types of family engagement tools are of greatest value to educators?**

The study also explored the types of family engagement tools that are of greatest value to educators. Educators strategically supported bilingual family engagement efforts through the creative use of existing tools and resources. Results indicated educators valued a wide variety of tools, including tools that are available in multiple languages, and specifically those designed to share with families. Educators were supportive of using multiple tools with families at the beginning of each school year. Family surveys, in particular, were valued for the opportunity they provide to understand early on what each family can contribute about their cultures to increase the richness of the education provided to all students in the classroom. Educators shared that the self-reflection tools helped them think about how to help families increase their engagement in student learning. Overall, participants indicated that they valued the information embedded within the tools and looked forward to trying new ideas from the tools in the upcoming school year.

During year two of the study, educators strategically supported family engagement efforts through the creative use of existing tools and resources. Many participants modified existing tools to meet their specific needs (i.e., surveys). Participants shared the importance of a uniform communication method for conversing with families that offers two-way translation features. Participants believe it is important to teach families in person how to sign up for and use tech tools such as communication apps and believe it is beneficial to get started using tools at the beginning of the school year, perhaps during a family–school event such as Back to School Night.

Other tools that were widely utilized and valued by participants included:

- family surveys to gather information directly from caregivers
- guide with information on how to improve communication and increase engagement through social media
- bookmarks that include questions caregivers can ask while reading with children
- video for supporting literacy through at-home conversations
- list of picture books that promote translanguaging
- list of translation and interpretation resources, including translation apps

Participants reported positive outcomes from using tools they had not considered before, such as the Social Media Guide. One participant shared,

The Social Media Guide was incredible. I love that examples were given in order to get an idea of how to go about the strategy. I was able to effectively use this tool with success...I would post every other day and keep a close eye on parent posts, comments, and likes. Although this took time, it was very worth it! Students would talk about their activities with their families! One family replied to a post by saying, "We enjoyed this activity so much, we had never thought about doing this and it was so special!" They went on an insect hunt and graphed the insects that they found!

Furthermore, educators valued tools that helped them gather information about their students' families, such as the Values and Traditions Survey: "The Values and Traditions survey will help me form a deeper connection with my families. It may also encourage families to share their cultural values and traditions with my whole class." Some tools encouraged participants to think differently about who should be responsible for family engagement: "I like the idea of enlisting parents to be in charge of getting other families involved...[a] comfortable way to engage with families and give them opportunities to engage with each other."

Participants also reported highly valuing tools such as the Self-Rating Scales because they helped them reflect on their practice and track their progress: "I think it is a good way to find out what my own and our schools' strengths and weaknesses [are]. From the information we get on the rating scale, we will be able to set up goals and a 100-day plan to help us grow." Many participants shared that they have reconsidered what it means to engage bilingual families.

**Q3: How are the components of the framework demonstrated in educators' family engagement efforts?**

Participant teams selected one component of the framework on which to focus their inquiry cycle and engagement efforts. Communication was the prominent focus in family engagement projects, with participants determining that family communication needs and training in the use of uniform, two-way communication and translation tools were important aspects of their bilingual family engagement efforts. One team shared that a father didn't know how to text but wanted to learn so he could better communicate with the school. Another team noticed a discrepancy in family self-reporting (feeling connected to school) and actual behavior (not reading newsletters nor responding to teacher questions). As a result, the team tested different communication strategies in addition to asking parents what they prefer.

Many participants' family engagement efforts also focused on equity and building stronger relationships with bilingual families. Participants stated that

connections were important, yet had been missing due to COVID pandemic restrictions. Some groups focused on developing meaningful relationships with bilingual families to increase the amount of time parents were reading with their children. These groups expressed the need for caregivers to read aloud in their home languages. Several participants connected with the idea of having families mentor other families as an effective practice for engagement and advocacy. One participant shared:

I love the idea of parents mentoring other parents. There is such a cultural divide between our bilingual families and our schools. I believe parent leaders could start bridging the gap and start to get our bilingual families not just involved but engaged.

All participant teams focused on gaining information about cultures with which they were not yet familiar in order to understand cultural norms and to build stronger relationships through social–emotional learning. One participant explained: “Our project is all about how to make our classrooms more inclusive and welcoming and making it a safe place for students to learn and to learn about students’ culture.”

The engagement efforts of each participating team aligned with the framework due to their selection of one framework component and their core concentration on student learning. Participants worked with their bilingual families to encourage students’ development of math literacy, make connections between classroom and at-home learning, increase time for reading at home together, and emphasize students’ social–emotional learning. Despite focusing on one framework component for the inquiry cycle, teams came to enact all three components of communication, advocacy, and relationships to support student learning. We believe that the reciprocal, interactive nature of the framework components lent themselves to supporting bilingual families in multiple ways simultaneously. For example, one team used text messaging to support families when reading at home by encouraging different literacy activities, and families shared videos of the results (communication, student learning). In order to begin this text messaging effort, the team leveraged their existing relationships with bilingual families and met in person to explain the plan and recruit participants (relationships). These efforts resulted in a group of caregivers signing up to participate, with some parents first asking clarifying questions and one parent expressing the need for support to learn how to text message (advocacy). Another group invited parents to a math night and had families communicate to practice math literacy. They built relationships by providing in-person interaction and provided activities that built connections and trust. The advocacy component was evident when the group surveyed families to get input/feedback and stated they will use these ideas for the next

event. Also, students were empowered to lead math games with families. Each of the teams' projects provided evidence that the launching of one framework component acted as a catalyst for engagement with the entire framework.

**Q4: How does using the inquiry process to articulate a family engagement strategy influence educator enactment of the framework?**

The research team also explored how the inquiry process aided participating educators to question their assumptions about family engagement and focus their efforts on learning what does work in their unique contexts to support families to engage in student learning. Educators needed support and guidance in order to engage in an inquiry cycle, particularly with the processes of forming an inquiry question and collecting and analyzing data. Teams committing their inquiry questions and action plans to “paper” made it possible for the research team members to clarify plans and support teams to stay on track for successful project implementation and data collection. Teams reported that moving on to the action planning process helped them think through their inquiry questions, making them clearer, more specific, and more concrete. Engaging in a process, rather than swiftly moving to action, allowed space for teams to explore divergent thinking. The action plan structure helped with convergent thinking and, ultimately, making decisions on implementation and data collection. Providing models of the process of crafting an inquiry question was not enough to support participants, so our research team provided additional coaching and support. As a result, participants realized they needed to narrow their inquiry questions to make them feasible. The evolution and refinement of their inquiry questions helped them become more focused on enacting the framework. One participant shared, “Finding the right grain size for the inquiry question was the most challenging task.”

Our research team collaborated with educator teams and collectively reached the conclusion that educators have assumptions about family engagement, and the inquiry process is a way for them to safely test their assumptions and learn what does and doesn't work in their own contexts. Teams grappled with data collection and with determining methods, prioritizing quantitative over qualitative, undervaluing observation of family behavior and language as a data source, and confusing family engagement data with student achievement data. For example, one participating team had difficulty recognizing data collection opportunities and was prompted by the research team member to consider: “How can you tell they are engaged? How much talking is going on? What is the quality of the talk? What is the climate in the room?” Guiding questions like these allowed for participants to engage in deeper conversations about the framework components, align the steps they were going to take, and become more purposeful when measuring outcomes.



Despite the challenges of engaging in inquiry cycles, participants reported feeling motivated by the data they collected and excited about finding answers to their inquiry questions. One participant said, “The cycle of inquiry can be an evolving opportunity to support our students and their families. A good team can make a difference!” Participants were eager to share this new learning with colleagues and their principals in hopes of expanding their projects. Some participants hypothesized that their teams could build on their success by tapping into existing school and district resources, such as annual events, technology tools, and curricula. Other participants reflected on the process they engaged in as action researchers and how this experience helped them gain new knowledge. One participant noted, “We were successful by first starting small and testing out an idea through the inquiry process, which was valuable. I learned a lot that will be useful in next steps.”

**Q5: What do leaders and their teams need to consider when supporting educators’ family engagement efforts?**

Participants in this study shared several key conditions that they deemed essential for taking part in family engagement efforts, including: creating a supportive climate, cultivating trust, and adapting to the school community. Participants expressed that strong collaboration among educator team members positively impacted their family engagement efforts. They shared that family engagement endeavors require dedication and shared sense of urgency for them to be successful. In order to sustain the work, educators believed that leaders would be wise to begin with those on their staff who are willing, even eager, to do the work. Participants considered their colleagues’ positive attitudes, high levels of motivation, and sincere commitment as key factors in their teams’ success. They also reported that coaching and support from their colleagues positively influenced their family engagement efforts. A supportive climate can empower educators to take risks and try new strategies, both of which are required for family engagement and school improvement efforts to take place.

Many participants expressed the importance of not making assumptions about what families need, prefer, or know how to do. They shared how important it is for educators to connect with the families they serve in order to learn and understand their wants and needs and to use a variety of tools and approaches to engage them effectively. One educator shared that getting students actively involved and excited to help facilitate learning builds a positive relationship and cultivates trust. Additionally, learning about family and cultural knowledge and experience that might impact communication efforts are important to consider. It is imperative that leaders resource family engagement

initiatives to support educators, students, and caregivers and value and incorporate feedback to nurture and maintain trusting relationships.

Participants expressed the importance of educators continually adapting and evolving their family engagement efforts and to seek continuous improvement opportunities within their school communities. Educators also shared the importance of their teams moving beyond surface level data analysis and continuing to question and test their assumptions. One team realized that their family survey results contrasted with other evidence they had gathered and contradicted their personal experiences with emergent bilingual families. They responded by collecting additional evidence and planned to test new strategies. The timing of family engagement efforts was a common concern among participants, with many holding the belief that *when* their engagement efforts occur during the academic year matters greatly and hypothesized that starting these efforts at the beginning of the school year will have a positive impact on family engagement and student learning outcomes. Alternatively, one participant shared that events that occur simultaneously at the beginning of the school year can make engagement with school more challenging for families because they are simply pressed for time (e.g., the harvesting of local crops coincides with the first two months of the school year). It is important for educators to connect with and understand the families they serve and to make adaptations to engage them effectively.

In summary, the results of the qualitative descriptive data collection and analysis revealed the following findings:

- Bilingual family engagement requires a sense of urgency and commitment in order for efforts to be impactful, and participants reported high levels of motivation and interest in sustaining and expanding their bilingual family engagement efforts at the conclusion of their inquiry cycles.
- The framework provides a guide to an intentional strategy for engaging families of bilingual students.
- The communication component of the framework was prominent in bilingual family engagement projects, with participants determining that family communication needs and training in the use of two-way communication and translation tools used consistently across classrooms were important aspects of their bilingual family engagement efforts.
- The inquiry process helps educators to question their assumptions about bilingual family engagement and focus their efforts on learning what does work in their unique contexts to support bilingual families to engage in student learning.
- Teaching and learning conditions changed due to pandemic restrictions, and participants reported feeling distant and disconnected from their students' families.

- Participants reported their schools and districts effectively engage with bilingual families, yet they describe limited opportunities to participate in professional learning experiences centered on family engagement.
- Family surveys were valued for the opportunity they provide to understand the needs of each family and what they can contribute about their cultures to increase the richness of the education provided to all students in the classroom.
- Participants reported that their schools and/or districts are more successful with the communication and relationship components of the framework than with the advocacy component.

## Discussion

Overall, we conclude that the framework can be effective. One finding of this study is that educators need support and guidance in order to engage in inquiry cycles, for which a framework such as this could assist in guiding interactions and discussions with families. In particular, the educator participants needed significant assistance in forming an inquiry question and collecting and analyzing data. As noted by the participants, educators need support in developing a strategy to drive efforts to engage families of bilingual students, and the use of tools and other resources to mitigate language barriers are of significant help. These types of efforts are supported by research as scholars have recently pushed the field to center critical and equity-oriented issues such as examining the ways that educational leaders share power with families that have been historically excluded by schools (Ishimaru, 2020; Khalifa, 2018). Consequently, the enactment of the framework and its components assisted the participants in developing an intentional strategy to support families of emergent bilinguals.

At the heart of the strategy, participants were able to center student learning as a trigger for enacting all three framework components as being the central target for urgency. This is a departure from past practice, moving away from previous models that took a deficit-based approach to “fix” parents (Olivos, 2012). In reviewing the data from the study, several patterns around the enactment of the framework emerged from the data, revealing three topics deemed notable by participants: (a) structured yet flexible approach, (b) resources and support, and (c) continuous improvement.

### Structured Yet Flexible Approach

The first topic is the importance of employing a structured approach to family engagement efforts that also allows educators the flexibility to adapt to the needs of the families in their local contexts. Our findings indicate that educators benefited from the structure of the framework because it clearly and

succinctly synthesizes what the research literature deems important for bilingual family engagement, thus making it easier for practitioners to understand, remember, and use. Participants used the framework as a tool for focusing the content and scope of their family engagement projects and for determining their precise inquiry questions. Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the possible topics and approaches for their family engagement projects, and the framework provided support to help them narrow their focus and design projects that were feasible, measurable, and meaningful. We also discovered that by enacting one framework component to engage bilingual families, participants came to enact all three components of communication, advocacy, and relationships to support student learning.

Participants also expressed appreciation for the flexibility to design projects that matched their needs and those of the families they serve, rather than executing a prescribed program or project. Inquiry cycles provided enough structure to support educator teams to plan, investigate, and reflect on their projects, yet allowed them to make timely decisions and pivots when necessary. The teaching and learning conditions during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years were unprecedented due to the COVID pandemic and resulting protocols. Participants reported feeling disconnected from their students and families and a strong desire to reestablish relationships with them. The inquiry process helped participants better understand what bilingual families want and need to support student learning, and participants overwhelmingly reported a desire to continue to learn what works and doesn't work to engage families in their local contexts.

### **Resources and Support**

The second topic indicated by participants is the need for additional resources and support to assist them in designing and carrying out family engagement initiatives. Participants suggested that training for staff is needed so that educators can learn family engagement strategies and gain cultural competency that aligns with the needs of their school communities. Educators in this study were creative in how they used their time to meet and collaborate, but they reported the need for more time to plan and test their family engagement projects. Likewise, educators who attempt to design and investigate family engagement projects in their own contexts will likely need guidance on how to engage in inquiry cycles, coaching on how to recognize and test assumptions, and support to analyze data and determine what was learned through the inquiry process. School and district leaders should consider the resources currently available to assist educators in family engagement efforts and be open to acquiring new resources, as well as using existing resources in new ways.

Resources and support for communicating with bilingual families was a top concern for study participants. A consistent, two-way mode of communication between educators and families, available in multiple languages, is a realistic need in many schools. Educators should review multilingual accessibility features of any tools they currently use or are considering for family engagement efforts and ensure that teachers and families receive the training necessary to leverage them for maintaining school–family communication across languages. School and district leaders should also consider moving beyond more traditional communication methods such as hiring translators and interpreters and include additional technology-based resources that can provide timely support for educators and families across the system.

### **Continuous Improvement**

The final topic that emerged from the findings was the notion that, in order for family engagement efforts to be successful, they require tending and nurturing in a continuous improvement model. In the case of family engagement, continuous improvement includes the acknowledgment by stakeholders that family engagement is a never-ending process that is dynamic, not static. This means that educators, leaders, and families will need to work together at every stage of a student’s journey through the education system. Stakeholders should expect this journey to evolve over time and should be ready to adapt to changes along the way.

Continuous improvement also includes the adoption of a growth mindset by all stakeholders, including students, so that efforts to engage families are viewed through an asset-oriented lens and stakeholders are encouraged to take risks, try new strategies, and learn from mistakes. The inquiry process utilized in this study offered participants many opportunities to focus on families’ strengths, design and test new approaches, use the framework and existing tools in innovative ways, and learn quickly and often. The structure of an inquiry cycle lends itself to a continuous process of learning and measured progress, which can help sustain family engagement efforts. Participants indicated a sense of satisfaction from their participation in an inquiry cycle and reported experiencing high levels of motivation to continue, and expand on, their initial engagement efforts.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The study included a small sample size of 36 educators who volunteered to participate and was spread out among 11 elementary schools and 8 school districts in California. Due to the research occurring at the beginning of the pandemic, all exploration was completed remotely. Workshops, application of

work, and final data were completed by educator teams at school sites and were shared with our research team and fellow participants through virtual meetings. Onsite observations conducted by researchers would have provided additional opportunities to gather data and possibly led to the development of further insight into the enactment of the framework and tools, as well as the inquiry process itself. A larger sample size and different contexts could influence the results of future research.

Data collection by participants occurred late in the school year which resulted in participants reporting feeling rushed to complete their projects. For future study, it may be beneficial to start inquiry projects at the beginning of the school year to allow participants more time to try new approaches and gather data. The results of this study do not address how the timeline of events influenced study outcomes.

Feedback from families was challenging to capture because the first year of this research occurred during full remote learning, and in the second year, families were not permitted to enter school buildings. Our research team encouraged participants to find creative ways to engage families which led to participants considering a hybrid approach that included in-person contact as well as virtual contact. More family feedback may have been informative in drawing study conclusions and implications. Additional research that features families more prominently in the inquiry process could yield important findings.

We chose to engage participants in the inquiry process so that educator teams could lead projects that were personally meaningful and applicable to their unique educational contexts. Additional research into how to maximize the inquiry process for family engagement is needed, as well as research to uncover how leaders can best support teams of educators engaged in inquiry cycles.

Our research team had a collaborative presence with participants during the research and inquiry processes, as they attempted to provide each group a psychologically safe environment to delve into family engagement content and to share honest feedback. Participants reported that creating a supportive climate, cultivating trust, and adapting to the school community were conditions that positively influenced their family engagement efforts. However, more research is needed to identify a comprehensive list of conditions necessary to support and sustain family engagement efforts and to understand how leaders can establish these conditions in schools. The study did not address how educators might share their learning across the educational system. Despite the limitations of this study, the findings are a worthy contribution to the growing body of research that focuses on family engagement and family–school partnerships. However, additional research into how educators spread and scale their work could be beneficial.

Overall, we conclude that the framework can be effective in supporting educators' understanding and efforts to improve family engagement at their schools, particularly for bilingual families. We believe that the reciprocal, interactive nature of the framework lends itself to supporting family engagement in student learning in multiple ways, specifically in the areas of communication, advocacy, and relationships. The employment of a structured yet flexible approach that includes an inquiry process can positively impact educators involved in family engagement efforts. Educators engaged in such efforts require resources and support in order to be successful. Educators can also be strategic and innovative in their use of resources to foster family engagement. A continuous improvement model that includes the acknowledgement by stakeholders that family engagement is a process that benefits from a growth mindset, can help leaders establish the conditions necessary for family engagement initiatives to thrive, particularly in working with students from underserved communities.

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Carlas McCauley is an associate professor and associate dean for Research and Sponsored Programs at the Howard University School of Education; he was formerly with the University of California Davis, School of Education and the director of the National Center on School Turnaround. Dr. McCauley's research involves school finance, resource allocation, school improvement, and community engagement. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Carlas McCauley, Howard University, School of Education, 2441 4th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20059, or email [carlas.mccauley@howard.edu](mailto:carlas.mccauley@howard.edu)

Julie Webb is an education consultant working with schools and school districts across the United States. Dr. Webb is a National Board Certified Teacher with a

passion for literacy instruction and organizational change. Her research involves community and family engagement and a focus on teaching and learning.

Suzanne Abdelrahim is an education consultant who works with schools and school districts across the United States. Dr. Abdelrahim's research involves community and family engagement and working with English Language Learners.

Soha Mahmoud-Tabana is an education consultant who works with schools and school districts nationwide. Ms. Mahmoud-Tabana has taught in elementary schools both in the U.S. and abroad. She has worked as an instructional coach facilitating professional development across schools. Her research involves community and family engagement and working with English Language Learners.