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Daniela Panuco
California State University, Monterey Bay

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¿Qué Dijo?: Improving Communication with Hispanic Parents

Daniela Panuco

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Dr. Patty Whang

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Abstract

Currently, schools are sending home a variety of messages and information so that parents can support their children during distance learning. An argument is made that the children of those Hispanic parents are falling behind due to the language barrier. Thus, this capstone project focuses on the communication between a school and its Hispanic parents and how to improve it, so that it positively affects the performance of students. Considerations of the issue should include the perspectives of school administration, parents, and students. The three action options that emerged from interviews with school administration and parents include: hiring a translator, making phone calls home, and hosting parent informational workshops. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, an action option is recommended that is intended to benefit the school, parents, and students.

¿Que Dijo?: Improving Communication with Hispanic Parents

Not knowing or understanding a language can be intimidating. All you can hear is a tone of voice and try to decipher what they are feeling without truly knowing what they are saying. Many people try to avoid the interaction by just evading the place or person that only uses that foreign language. This is especially true for hispanic parents when receiving information for their childrens' school. Parents are expected to receive, understand, and respond to most information being sent home from school, but how can this be expected if many hispanic parents cannot understand the language?

As a product of immigrant parents, I knew when my parents felt intimidated by the english language. I was about 6 years old when I became my parents' translator. I was expected to translate paperwork, conversations, phone calls, and any and all school related items. I was always the translator at my parent-teacher conferences and always had to translate paperwork that was sent home. There were times when paperwork was sent in spanish, but the words used were translated incorrectly by a computer and I had to go back and translate all over for my parents to understand. As time has progressed communication between parents and schools has switched to online, especially now given the circumstances. For hispanic parents, this has now created a bigger burden for them. From trying to understand paperwork, they now have to understand how to navigate a computer, clicking links, and following emails all to support their children in school. Schools continue to send emails and information for parents to help support their students, a parent who cannot understand the language and much less navigate a computer will only let their children fail. It is easy to expect the children of these hispanic parents to translate for them, but what about those kindergarten students who have never been to school

before? How can we expect them to know how to navigate an email if they are just learning to read?

Communication is key. Through communication a person is able to understand the concept being set forth. In schools, communication is important because it allows parents to be aware of what their children are learning, school wide events, school news, or any other important information. Unfortunately, Hispanic parents have the most difficulty when receiving communication from their child's school if the primary language at the school is English. When schools communicate with parents, they usually send the information in English, making it difficult to understand for Spanish speaking Hispanic parents. In addition to the language barrier, schools are now becoming paperless, especially now due to the circumstances of distance learning which creates another barrier. Not understanding the language or how to use technology makes communication with their children's school nearly impossible.

What is the problem?

Schools are always sending home information that contains the most basic information such as school wide events, to the most important information such as parent teacher conferences. All of the information sent home is primarily in English, but not all households use English as the primary language. Many schools fail to cater to their Hispanic parents because they do not make sure to translate correctly or ensure that they are receiving the information. This gives others an unfair advantage.

Hispanic parents are failing to receive or understand communication coming from their child's school. The parent is either not understanding or not receiving the information at all. There is an imbalance in communication between Hispanic parents and their children's school. Hispanic parents do not have the same access as their English-speaking counterparts. A study

based on the support immigrant hispanic mothers give their first grade students found that, “some mothers expressed distress that they could not help their children with their homework...’with school things I feel a little insecure because I don’t speak the language” (Johnson, Arevalo, Cates, et al, 2015). Schools are failing to properly communicate with Hispanic parents because they are not putting in the extra effort to ensure that these parents are understanding and receiving the information being sent home. Schools are failing to cater to the needs of Hispanic parents, letting their hispanic students fall behind because of the lack of communication.

Why is it an issue?

If a Hispanic parent fails to understand the communication from their student’s school, they will be unable to help the student reach their maximum potential. According to an article about parental involvement and academic success Day and Dotterer (2018) stated that, “Parental educational involvement—parenting practices at home or at school intended to improve academic outcomes—is often cited as an important avenue for improving academic achievement and subsequent educational attainment among diverse populations of students (e.g., Hill et al. 2004)” (p.1333).

Communication from the school may include important information that affects their student’s grades or education and they will fail to understand because of the language barrier. Several parents rely on their children or family members outside of their household to translate for them. This is especially harder for younger school-aged children who have to translate for their parents as emergent English language learners. If parents fail to receive or understand the information being sent home, their students will fall behind. One Hispanic parent at Bay Area Charter School reported that she was unaware of whether her child needed to attend class

virtually or in person during the start of the 2020-2021 school year. This parent stated that she was not aware because she could not understand what was sent home and her young child was unable to give her an accurate answer either. It was not until the parent called the school that she discovered that her child would be attending class virtually. Instances such as these are what make the communication between the school and a parent critical. If this parent would not have called the school, she would have driven her child to campus on the first day only to discover that no one else was there.

Parents who fluently speak and read English have an unfair advantage to Spanish speaking Hispanic parents. They are able to access more information with ease because they understand the language. Hispanic parents have to decipher the information on their own or ask to have it translated. In addition, not all translations are correct making it that much harder for these parents to understand. One parent from Bay Area School who is bilingual claimed that he would rather read the English version of the information because it makes more sense than the Spanish version. Another bilingual parent claimed that the words used in the Spanish translation were too formal, that at times she is forced to look up the word or read the English version to understand what is being said.

Parents are failing to understand and receive the information they need to ensure that their child is succeeding in school. Given the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important that all parents are up to date with all school communication. Hispanic parents should not have to struggle to receive communication from their child's school. They should be given the same right and access as all parents at the school. In order to make sure all students succeed, they need to make sure that all are given the same access.

What should be done?

In order for Hispanic parents to fully support their students they should be able to receive proper information. Hispanic parents should be given information that they can understand. Information that they can understand means providing them with properly translated information that they can access with ease. Not all parents are knowledgeable with technology so it is important that there are other means of communication that provide the same information. Some schools send home information through the mail, via email, school apps, or phone calls home.

Allowing a variety of ways to receive communication allows for a better opportunity for parents to receive the information to help support their students. Schools should be more than willing to adjust their communication in order to make sure that all students and families are being treated equally. If not all parents are being able to access the same information as the rest of the parents, it is giving others an unfair advantage. Communication from a child's school should not have to be considered a privilege. Schools should adjust to the means of communication that allows Hispanic parents the ability to be aware of all school news, especially any information that directly affects their child.

If a school decides to be completely paperless for communication, it is important that they keep in mind that there are parents who have limited to no access to a device that can access the information. Paperless should not just be limited to email. Not all parents have emails. These schools might consider sending home phone calls or text messages in Spanish so that Hispanic are able to understand and continue to be paperless. Schools should also consider giving parents the option to choose their preferred form of communication so that they can ensure that all parents are receiving necessary information.

Not only should all parents be given the option of a preferred means of communication, they should also be given the opportunity to be taught how to use a certain means of

communication if a school wants to push it. Because most schools have gone virtual, it is important that they are putting in more effort in making sure that Hispanic parents are still having access to communication. Some Hispanic parents rely on their children to bring home any necessary information, but that is no longer an option.

Method¹

For this project some interviews were conducted to determine the accessibility of communication between a school and hispanic parents. Having the proper communication between the school and parents will carry on to better support students inside and outside of the classroom. In order to complete any sort of task there must be a proper understanding of what the task is and how to do it, so it is crucial that parents as much as students are comprehending what is being sent home so that they can keep track of what their student is doing or must do. Now with the current state, it is even more important that parents are able to properly communicate with their students' school so that they may continue to thrive in their educational career.

Context

This research took place at Bay Area Charter School located in South Santa Clara county. Bay Area School is a newly opened school welcoming grades kinder through second in 2011, adding another grade every new school year until reaching eighth grade. Bay Area Charter is surrounded by many low-income apartments that house mainly latino families. Not far from the school are several convenience stores and gas stations, as well as popular shopping outlets. Because this k-8 school was placed in a very small area, it is made up of several portables that are gated off by a large black fence. In order to enter the school you must use the call box and be granted permission by the office managers. The school shares a large recreational field with the

¹ From the capstone project of Daniela P. (FA 20)
Pseudonyms have been given to all proper names

middle school next door. The field has always belonged to the middle school, but as Bay Area Charter began to expand they were granted permission to use the field for their students in agreement with the middle school. Bay Area Charter has a small gym that doubles as their cafeteria. Bay Area Charter houses a little over 530 students from kindergarten to eighth grade, having about 60 students in each grade level. They have a Hispanic/Latino population of 64.60%, 26% of them being English learners (SarcOnline.org). According to EdData.org, 25.3% of English learners are Spanish speakers.

Participants and Participant Selection

I invited five hispanic parents to participate in this study. In addition to the parents, I also interviewed the school principal and office manager who have been at the school site since the school was founded in 2011. All participants in this study were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity and confidentiality.

Participants

Maya Contreras. Maya is a first year principal at Bay Area School. She has been at Bay Area School since it's opening in 2011. Contreras began as a second grade teacher, working at that position for about three years, then began to move up into higher positions, such as her current position as school principal. Contreras believes the school could help mend the communication issue by allowing parents to choose their means of communication, allowing them to have an opinion and input on their child's education.

Aly Martinez. Aly has also been at Bay Area School since it opened in 2011. Not only is Aly part of the school's administration, she is also the parent of an elementary grade student at

Bay Area School. Aly was formerly head secretary at the school. She was previously in charge of sending home the translated communication to Hispanic parents.

Jasmine Velasquez. Jasmine is the mother of a 5th grade student at Bay Area School. Currently she asks her child to translate any information being sent home. When her child has problems with zoom or with their homework she asks for the help of a family member since she does not speak any English. She does not use email or any apps the school uses as she does not know how to use either of the two. Jasmine would appreciate it if the school could provide better translations for her to be able to understand what her child is doing.

Nayeli Gomez. Nayeli is the mother of a student in kindergarten. As her first year of having her child at the school, Nayeli finds it difficult to support her. Nayeli's child has never been to the campus or met her teachers in person because she began her first school year during the global pandemic. When necessary Naylei will ask family members to help translate information or she will call the school to receive necessary information.

Maria Esquivel. Maria has three children who attend Bay Area School who are in third, fifth, and sixth grade. Maria does try to use the apps the school uses to provide parents with information about the school and their children, but she has difficulty understanding the translations because the app translates the words. Maria believes the school should have a hispanic person translate the information so that "parents like [herself] can understand".

Angelica Pacheco. Angelica is the mother of a sixth grade student at Bay Area School. Her child has been at the school since second grade. Angelica has relied on her two eldest daughters to help translate information being sent home from school. Angelica has trouble when receiving information because she does not understand how to use the apps the school uses and

has been trying to learn to use email. Angelica has stated in Spanish, “Hispanic parents of my generation don’t know that you can click on the little colored words in an email”.

Mia Hernandez. Mia Hernandez is the mother of a second grader and a sixth grader at Bay Area School. Just like the rest of the mothers interviewed, she relies on her children or family members for help with translations and the children’s homework.

Researcher. This topic is very important to me because I am the product of immigrant parents who did not learn to speak English. I myself struggled to understand things in school and had to find ways to explain things to my parents as I learned to navigate between speaking English and Spanish. My parents always relied on me to translate anything that was in English and if I did not know I had to use context clues to figure it out and explain. I understand the difficulty that Hispanic parents face when trying to understand something and not having anyone to translate. My mother earned as much as an elementary school education and my father was unable to fully complete high school. They were only able to help my sisters and I so much with the little English they knew and education they had. I often had to teach myself and support myself through school. By having properly translated information, Hispanic parents will be able to better support their students.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

The questions below were asked to the principal and office manager in English.

1. How responsive are hispanic parents to communication being sent home?
2. When are parents more responsive?
3. How easy or difficult is it to contact a hispanic parent to inform them of their student?
4. How has distance learning affected communication with hispanic parents?

5. How has the use of technology instead of paper affected communication with hispanic parents?

The questions below were asked to the parents in Spanish.

1. How do you receive communication from the school?
2. When do you find yourself having the most trouble understanding any information being sent home?
3. In what ways do you think you can better support your student?
4. Do you use Parent Square at all? Why or why not?
5. How is using technology or applications made receiving communication easier or more difficult?
6. How are you able to understand any information/communication sent home?
7. How does the communication help you better support your student?
8. When your student runs into trouble at home with school work, how do you support them?
9. In what ways has the school helped you understand information being sent home?
10. How has the pandemic affected the way you communicate with school personnel?

Procedure

All participants were interviewed individually. Parents were interviewed on the school campus following social distancing guidelines. School administration was interviewed individually through a zoom meeting due to busy school scheduling. Each participant was asked a total of 5-10 questions making the interview last about 15-30 minutes in length. Some interviews took an additional 10 minutes for clarifying questions and concerns.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews will be coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, the office manager, school principal and five hispanic parents were interviewed to obtain their opinion on what they think could be done to improve the way the communication to hispanic parents is provided. This is important because hispanic parents are unable to properly support their students when they are unable to understand any information being sent home. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time; cost; and effectiveness. Time measures the amount of time it takes to complete the action option presented. This is measured by how much is available in a day for the action to be completed. Cost measures the cost in dollars of the action provided. This is measured by the amount of money it takes to fulfill the option at hand. Effectiveness measures how effective the action option provided is. This is measured by the response of Hispanic parents to the action option. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Time	Cost in dollars	Effectiveness
Hire Translator	Medium	Medium/High	High
Phone Calls	Medium	Medium	High
Parent Workshops	Medium	Low	Medium

Hire Translator

This option would require the school to hire a person to translate information being sent out to Hispanic parents. According to JobMonkey.com, schools hire interpreters or translators for documents being sent home, confidential meetings, schools board meetings, parent-teacher conferences and the list goes on. Based on a search on EdJoin.org I was able to find that some school translators in California are paid from \$15 an hour to about \$22 an hour. Pay rates change depending on the school or district and a person's education. This option will more than likely require the school to look into their budget in order to decide how much they could offer a potential candidate and whether they would be hired full time or not.

Phone Calls

Through interviews with school administration, Bay Area Charter was able to inform me that phone calls could be an available option. Having phone calls as an option means that Bay Area School would have to send home pre-recorded voice messages or actually have office personnel call each home individually. If the school chooses to have a person do the call rather than to send out a pre-recorded message, they might also choose to hire someone to make the calls so that office personnel may attend the needs of other parents and students. The school would also have to decide whether to call all families in person or only call hispanic families in person to ensure they receive the information.

Based on interviews I had with Bay Area School administration, Aly, she was able to inform me that they have previously sent pre-recorded messages on the phone. Aly mentioned that she was the person to record messages and it took her five minutes to record the messages; messages lasted between 40 seconds to one minute and 30 seconds. With sending home these messages, not all parents answered because they recognized the school phone number and purposely ignored the call.

One Hispanic parent at Bay Area Charter School reported that she was unaware of whether her child needed to attend class virtually or in person during the start of the 2020-2021 school year. This parent stated that she was not aware because she could not understand what was sent home and her young child was unable to give her an accurate answer either. It was not until the parent called the school that she discovered that her child would be attending class virtually. Instances such as these are what make the communication between the school and a parent critical. If this parent would not have called the school, she would have driven her child to campus on the first day only to discover that no one else was there.

Parent Workshops

Generally, all schools have board meetings or open school meetings where parents are allowed to attend in order to learn changes about the school or introductions to anything that could affect the school, their childrens' education, funding, etcetera. Similarly to those parent informational meetings, Bay Area School could provide parent workshops that educate Hispanic parents on how to use and access emails, apps used by the school to communicate, and zoom. This option could come to the school at little to no cost. The school could ask a bilingual parent, staff, or faculty to lead the workshop or hire a translator. Different aspects of time for this option could be the time it takes to organize the workshop, including finding volunteers or hiring the translator; the length of the workshop; or the time hispanic parents have to attend the workshop. Some parents have several jobs or jobs with extensive work hours that inhibit them from attending the workshops. Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson (2018) found that, "...families have barriers to participation due to economic, linguistic, cultural, or life circumstances" (p. 186).

However, having workshops could be an effective option because Hispanic parents would have hands-on demonstrations, visual supplements, and staff to help them learn to navigate and

explain how the emails and programs work. As stated in their article, “Given the importance of parental engagement with their children’s schools (Hill & Tyson, 2009), special outreach is needed for parents who may be unsure of how to initiate involvement (Perna & Titus, 2005).” (Gonzalez, Borders, Himes, Villalba, & Henderson, 2018, p. 187), holding workshops for these parents could not only improve communication and the understanding of how to receive that communication, they could furthermore improve involvement in their children’s school.

Recommendation

After analyzing the three options presented, the best recommendation is to provide parents with workshops. Hosting parent workshops would help improve parent knowledge on the use of technology including email and zoom to help better support their students.

Limitations

A limitation to consider is that means of communication between schools and parents may change and can vary from school to school. The information provided in this analysis applies specifically to the community partner in question, so the recommendation may not be suitable for all schools.

Concessions

While this paper recommends the use of workshops, phone calls and hiring a translator should not be disregarded. These options could also benefit parents who are unable to attend workshops due to busy schedules. Phone calls would be able to reach parents at any time by leaving a voicemail if necessary. Hiring a translator would help diminish lack of understanding based on the use of words which could also improve parental involvement.

Consequences and Implications

Before turning into hosting parent workshops schools will have to consider the fact that attendance for these workshops will not always be as expected and they cannot guarantee that the Hispanic parents will understand how the applications work. There are parents who might need one-on-one assistance or longer, more detailed instructions to be able to navigate the system alone. Parents might not also want to attend because of the pandemic. Facilities must follow strict government issued regulations making it so only a few parents at a time could attend. In addition, workshops could be shut down at any moment based on the effects of the global pandemic.

Conclusion

In closing, Hispanic parents are not having their needs met. Schools are failing to cater to their needs, not providing them with the proper tools to understand and receive the communication being sent home. Schools should consider providing workshops for hispanic parents so that they may have hands-on demonstrations and face-to-face interactions with staff and faculty so that they may ask questions and address concerns as needed. This will allow all parents to receive the same information and access as well as allow all students to have the proper support by giving their parents the proper tools.

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