Perspectives and Experiences of Emergent Bilingual Parents Concerning Their Engagement with Their Child's Teachers and School

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Abstract

Emergent bilinguals (EBs) represent the fastest-growing population in U.S. public schools (Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015), and this growth includes EB parents as well. This qualitative study analyzes emergent bilingual (English learner) parents' perspectives of their child's teachers and school. Many educators and EB parents face linguistic or cultural barriers when engaging with each other, leaving parents feeling excluded. EB parents can be left out of their students' classrooms because of their English learner status. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Freire's critical theory were used in this study to critically view EB parent engagement perspectives and practices. Data were collected through a focus group and interviews, and then was analyzed using discourse analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2006) for themes of inclusion and identity. Methods were based on Creswell & Creswell's (2018) research addressing the use of focus groups and interviews to gain more information from participants and allow the researcher to guide the kind of questions that are asked. Findings revealed practices where emergent bilingual parents felt both included and sometimes excluded in their child's education and school. This included mixed feelings about whether their language and culture were valued at the school. These findings show how consequential it is for educators to build relationships with emergent bilingual parents and demonstrate ways educators can involve them in their child's education. Additionally, from the EB parents' responses, it was not clear that teachers or schools were ready to make changes according to these parents' expectations but instead, showed that EB parents were appreciative of outreach towards them. The aim of this study is to promote more awareness and positive affect concerning teacher engagement with EB parents at this particular site. Implications include the possibility that other sites may learn and implement new ideas towards furthering communication between these minority groups. It is projected that from such implications, the common mindset of "us" versus "them" perspective can shift between teachers and EB parents to a united "us" in supporting children's education (Chavez-Reyes, 2010).

Keywords: *Parent Engagement, Emergent Bilingual, Inclusion*

Introduction

One of my students' parents, Maria, had just moved to the school's neighborhood from a Spanish speaking country the year prior. I asked her if she would volunteer on a field trip. Maria started offering to help more inside the classroom. She expressed that she had never been invited to one of her students' classrooms before because her students' teachers did not speak Spanish and did not know how to include her.

Emergent bilinguals (EBs) represent the fastest-growing population in U.S. public schools (Tarasawa & Waggoner, 2015). My experience with Maria made me ponder on what EB parents' expectations are for parent-teacher engagement despite cultural and linguistic differences between themselves and their children's teachers. Anyone whose English language skills are still developing are referred to as emergent bilinguals (Vera et al., 2012). Parent engagement is how the parents perceive themselves in a teacher role for their students (Ladky and Peterson, 2008). Teachers who think critically

about their parent engagement practices are increasing their conscientization or awareness of the reality that is needed for someone to truly transform or change (Freire, 1970).

Statement of the Problem

Due to cultural differences or language barriers, teachers, especially dominant English speaking teachers, do not always recognize or have knowledge of EB parents' backgrounds, including the ways they support their students at home. This misunderstanding can create a deficit mindset toward EBs (Protacio & Edwards, 2015). The purpose of this study is to learn from the voices of EB parents and to find out what their expectations are from these teachers and their school context and how that is similar or different from the EB parents' actual experience. This study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the personal experiences and perspectives of Emergent Bilingual parents concerning their engagement with their child's teachers and school?
2. What expectations do Emergent Bilingual parents have about interacting with their child's teachers and school?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study will be based on Paulo Freire's Critical theory and Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory (SCT). These theories have served as a call to social justice to solve current problems in education (Stetsenko, 2020).Using critical theory and SCT together, positions this work as Critical Sociocultural Theory (C-SCT). Vygotsky's focus on language connects with Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital; a social power, like language or culture, that is recognized by different social or cultural groups such as families, schools, or communities (Chen, 2020). Analyzing language, such as interviews and narratives as a mediational tool, can be applied to many areas of education including parent engagement when trying to understand and develop teacher-parent relationships.

Review of Literature

Current research on parent engagement focuses on what teachers can do to help parents assimilate into the mainstream culture of school. There is significantly less research that positions the parents as the ones that teachers can learn from for their parent engagement practices. Researchers in the EB field call for teachers to learn about EB families' culture and language and then take the initiative to engage with them (Arce, 2019; Shih, 2018).

This literature comes from a critical sociocultural lens to form a transformative view of education (Stetsenko, 2020). Critical pedagogy has implications for teaching multicultural education, particularly for teachers to evaluate their own practice and how they can have more conscientization. Studies similar to Arce (2019) have asked parents questions about how they feel about their student's schooling. This study will position EB parents as the ones that teachers can learn from through experiences they share in focus groups and interviews. Hearing from a group of EB parents sharing their experiences will allow them to demonstrate how their words and language have helped them mediate with the school/teachers. This information can be used by educators to discover ways they could better serve the EB student/parent population at their schools.

Methods and Research Context

This is a qualitative study[1] based on the recruitment of EB parents in both a focus group and interviews to hear and learn from their perspectives and expectations concerning parent engagement in

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[1] Qualitative research has many typologies but tends to be interpretive, descriptive, pragmatic and grounded in people's lives and experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Additionally, qualitative studies are described as research method that relies on [multimodal] texts, imagery, and other literary forms of data

schools. Transcripts from the focus group sessions[2] and face-to-face interviews were analyzed using discourse analysis (Scollon, 2006) as the main method for understanding the participants' perspectives.

The research site is located in the Mountain West Region of the United States. Research was conducted in a school district with 80% of all students being white with 14% of students being Hispanic. Purposeful selection was used to choose participants for this study (Creswell, 2014). The participants were 5 native Spanish speakers who have had children enrolled in the same school district.

Data Sources

The researchers used a series of planned open-ended questions as well as emergent questions to gather information from the participants. After the focus group sharing, each participant was interviewed individually. The purpose of these interviews was to ask for clarification from anything the participants said in the focus group. Participants could share any experiences they wanted to add outside of the guided questions or anything they were not comfortable with sharing in the focus group session. Interview questions were sent to participants in advance and asked in an open-ended format similar to the focus group. Video and audio recordings were used for data collection to provide an accurate transcript.

Data Analysis

Discourse analysis is a form of data analysis used in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2014; Scollon & Scollon, 2006). This kind of data analysis looks deeper into the language and actions of various cultural groups and allows for more insight into the participants' voices.

A data matrix, using google sheets, was created to organize all coding. The entire transcripts were translated (as needed) and reviewed and coded for keywords and ideas as relating to the overall research questions. Selections of the transcripts that exemplified the differing codes and keywords were selected and into a matrix to cross-examine for similarity and differences in responses and codes. Through coding, themes of empowerment or disempowerment (Stetsenko, 2017; van Lier, 1996) in the participants' experiences engaging with their child's teachers and schools were identified. A flow chart demonstrating the multiple levels of coding topics, keywords, and examples was created to demonstrate relationships given through the EB responses.

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[2] Interviews and focus groups are two different types of qualitative data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews can be conducted face to face, over the telephone, or over email exchange.

Figure 1. EB Responses Concerning Engagement Flow Chart
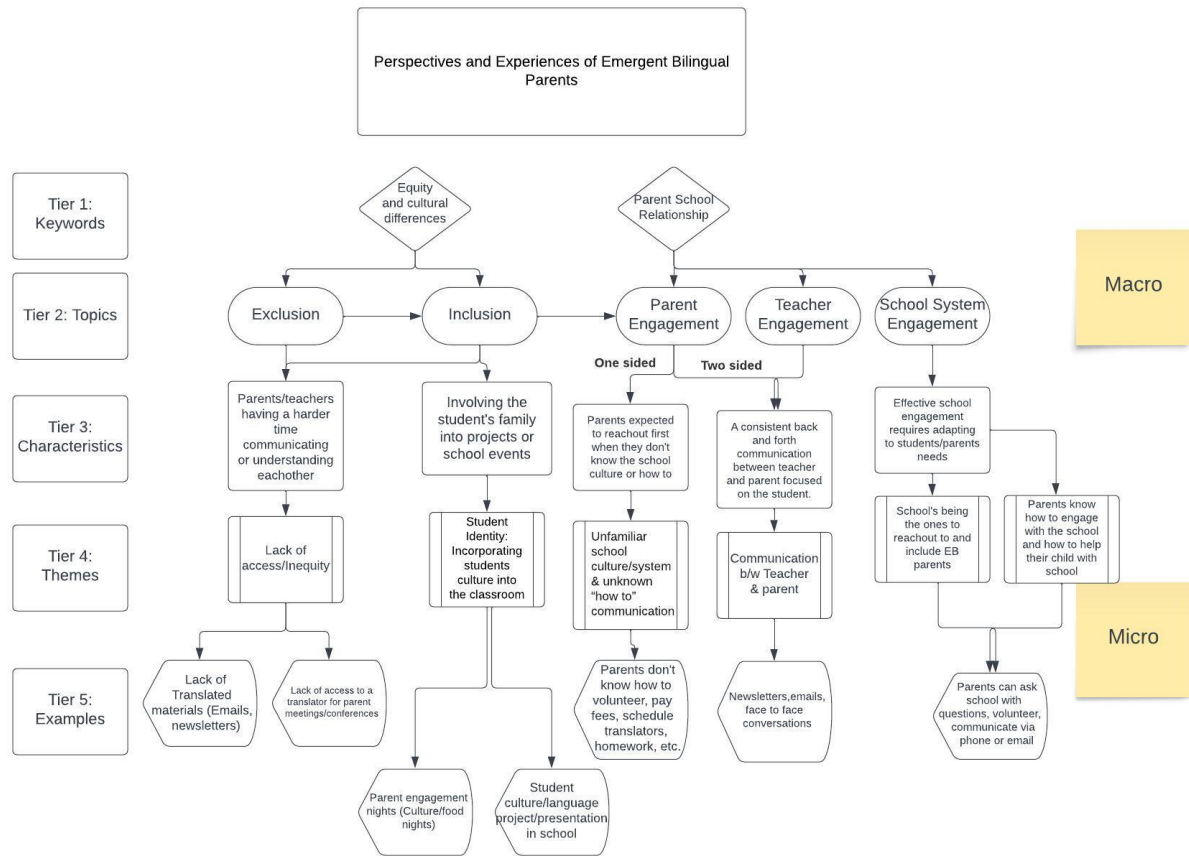
In addition to themes of power, characteristics and traits were additional pieces of information created to address the contexts and feelings the EB parents shared about teacher and school engagement (Figure 1).

Findings

Patterns of both exclusion and inclusion of EB parents were found in the coded transcripts. These themes were most often brought up when discussing communication. Participants mentioned that they struggled communicating with and understanding teachers and felt the teachers probably felt the same struggle towards them at times as well. These findings also revealed lack of access to materials like emails or newsletters from teachers or even knowing that they could have access to a translator when attending parent meetings and conferences. Effective communication between the parent and teacher was described as receiving materials "In Spanish and English", and consistent communication such as "weekly emails". Other examples of inclusion from the transcript included "parent engagement nights" involving culture or food or school based projects where students could present more about their culture or language to their class.

Three kinds or types of engagement were described in the findings from the study: Parent engagement, teacher engagement, and engagement within the school system. All of these types had comments that sounded like the engagement was one-sided, meaning that the communication was only coming from the parents or the teachers. Some responses did describe that the challenge of communication was a constant ongoing conversation between both parties. The traditional system in US

schools is for parents to reach out first when they have concerns about their child's education. Many of the participants recounted that they were new to this country and were unfamiliar with the school system and culture, which includes more proactive communication between the parents and the teacher. They were more quickly able to learn how to help their child and be involved in their education when there was more consistent back-and-forth communication between themselves and the teacher that focused solely on their student. Participants listed examples of this communication such as school newsletters, emails or even face-to-face conversations at school pick up or in formal meetings.

Many of the participants voiced what they thought effective school engagement was to them. They talked about adapting to students or parent needs and schools being the ones to reach out and include the emergent bilingual families. These parents were more prepared and had better knowledge of how to help their child with school because of the effective engagement from the school. They had already been reached out to by the school or teachers, so then these parents knew that they could ask questions, check on their children's progress more, and even volunteer/participate more fully in their child's educational experience.

Conclusions and Implications

Currently, there is a gap in EB parent engagement research that focuses on the voices of EB parents and how they orient towards full participation in U.S. English-dominant school systems. Findings from this study provide insights into what the parents appreciate and what their expectations are from the schools. Also of importance is the indirect implications of these parents being passively positioned in the context of reaching out. It is possible that while these parents appreciated schools providing more bilingual information and general information concerning interactive parent-teacher-school resources, the schools may be positioning these parents as a demographic that lacks knowledge and thus needs more knowledge. While this may or may not be a deficit perspective (depending on efforts and approach), findings from these parents demonstrate that the teachers and schools have not requested what they can learn from these parents. The EB parents did not share how they felt empowered, such as being asked, concerning what their expectations were by the teachers or schools. It is possible that this demographic is not given a lot of voice or choice as to whether the school system will meet expectations from their perspective, until they've learned to more fully understand the current system in place. This study has focused on awareness of EB voices, and can provide teachers and school administrators more clarity on how EB parents want to be communicated with and how they view involvement in their child's education, including both inside or outside the physical classroom. Giving EB parents a voice will help to share power between parents and teachers and should improve communication and expectations for teachers working with marginalized minority groups.

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