

Celebrating multilingualism to unlock the potential of family engagement

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For decades, the education community has sought to unravel the complexities of what contributes to a child's educational success. Countless studies have explored a multitude of factors, from socioeconomic status and student background to teacher characteristics to the type of school a student attends. However, one factor consistently stands out as a key determinant of educational achievement: family engagement in a child's education.

Intentional efforts by schools and teachers to warmly invite partnerships from families can have a powerful effect on student-level academic outcomes. By recognizing families' funds of knowledge and regularly sharing key information about what children are learning at school and how families can support that learning at home, children benefit. Indeed, extensive research supports the notion that when families are actively engaged in their children's education, it can significantly narrow the opportunity gap, irrespective of other risk factors.

Yet, the path to fostering increased family engagement in education is not without its own specific complexities. For example, the tremendous linguistic diversity present in our school communities necessitates intentional support to facilitate ongoing communication and trusted partnerships. In the United States, where the education system grapples with a persistent opportunity gap along racial and ethnic lines, fostering

communication across key adults who do not share a common language becomes paramount in ensuring equitable access to quality education.

Power of family engagement

Family engagement in education is the cornerstone of a child's academic success. It goes beyond attending parent-teacher conferences or school-based events; it's a dynamic partnership between the most important adults in a child's life that nurtures a child's learning journey. When families actively engage in their children's education, whether assisting with homework and learning projects to maintaining regular, open lines of communication with teachers and school staff, it creates a supportive ecosystem for academic growth.

Research shows that increased family engagement in learning leads to a range of benefits for students. When parents and caregivers actively engage with their children's education, students tend to have higher academic achievement, better attendance records, improved behavior in the classroom, and increased self-esteem. Moreover, students are more likely to complete high school and pursue post-secondary education when their families are involved in their learning journey.

It's clear that the quality of relationships between schools and families plays a fundamental role in shaping educational outcomes. However, unlocking the full potential of family engagement often requires addressing language mismatches that can hinder its efficacy.

Multilingualism enriches our educational landscape

The United States celebrates its rich diversity, reflected in the multitude of languages spoken by its student population. In 2021, about **21% of school-age children** spoke a language other than English at home. This mosaic of languages enhances our cultural richness, yet for families navigating an unfamiliar educational landscape due to limited English proficiency, engaging with the schooling system can feel daunting. Understanding school policies, communicating with teachers, and actively participating in school-related activities become challenging when teachers and families do not share a common language.

However, within this challenge lies an incredible opportunity. Multilingualism isn't just a reflection of diversity; it's an asset that, when embraced, enriches educational communities. As such, ensuring that regular two-way communication is possible for all teachers and families is critical. Families, equipped with support and resources in their native languages, can better aid their children's educational journey, fostering a deeper connection between home and school.

Furthermore, classrooms composed of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds present a chance for educators to explore innovative teaching methods that cater to varied learning styles, ensuring every student receives equitable access to education.

Strategies for recognizing and celebrating linguistic diversity

To recognize and celebrate linguistic diversity and unlock the powerful potential of family engagement, several strategies can be employed:

- **Multilingual resources:** Schools and districts can provide multilingual resources, including informational materials, websites, and communication channels to engage non-English-speaking families more effectively.
- **Diversity, equity and inclusion training:** Teachers and school staff can undergo training and ongoing coaching to promote asset-based thinking, support student identities, understand bias, and integrate equitable practices with culturally and linguistically diverse students and families.
- **Bilingual staff:** Hiring bilingual staff who can act as liaisons between the school and non-English-speaking families can facilitate communication and bridge cultural gaps.
- **Community partnerships:** Collaborating with community organizations and local support networks can provide additional resources and assistance to non-English-speaking parents.
- **Family engagement programs:** Establishing and promoting family engagement programs that focus on supporting two-way communication between educators and linguistically diverse families and providing opportunities for families to actively participate in their children's education.
- **Technology integration:** Leveraging technology, such as translation apps and online resources, can help connect educators and families who do not share a common language by providing real-time translation and interpretation services for families and school staff.

Policy Support: Advocating for policy changes at the district, state, and federal levels to ensure equitable access to education for all students and their families.

While acknowledging the hurdles, it's crucial to elevate the strength that multilingualism brings to our educational landscape. By continuing to develop inclusive strategies, such as bolstering bilingual education and support programs, and equipping schools and teachers with the resources they need to partner with linguistically diverse families, we pave the way for a more unified and thriving educational community.

Unleashing the potential of authentic family engagement

At the core of effective education lies authentic family engagement. Authentic family engagement goes beyond mere involvement—it's a dynamic partnership between educators and families. This engagement isn't a formality; it intricately aligns with a

high-quality curriculum and standards-based objectives. It's an inclusive partnership where families are not passive spectators but active contributors.

Authentic family engagement serves as a powerful catalyst in acknowledging and elevating the linguistic assets that lie within the US education system. By prioritizing open and inclusive communication, educators and families collaborate to celebrate multilingualism and leverage families' tremendous funds of knowledge.

This approach involves meeting families on their terms, using accessible technology, and providing learning materials in their home language. This not only fosters a deeper understanding of the educational process but also empowers families to actively participate in their children's learning journey. Through transparent and culturally sensitive practices, authentic family engagement ensures that language differences cease to be obstacles, transforming them into opportunities for shared understanding and enriched educational experiences.

To create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment, it is imperative that schools, educators, and policymakers celebrate and address the multitude of languages spoken by our students and their families. By implementing strategies such as authentic family engagement and technology, we can ensure that all families, regardless of the language spoken at home, have the opportunity to actively engage in their children's education, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes and a brighter future for all students.