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Personalmente: Home–School Communication Practices with (Im)Migrant Families in North Florida

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study that investigated home–school communication practices from two school districts in north Florida. Specifically, this study focuses on communication between education professionals and Spanish-speaking parents who were immigrant and migrant farmworkers. In this paper we use the term *(im)migrant* when referring to families that are both migrant and immigrant to represent the unique characteristics of the group. While prior research has examined communication practices for culturally and linguistically diverse populations, scant research has explored the context with (im)migrant families. Through field notes, home observations, and semistructured interviews, data were collected from parents, school personnel (including teachers, aides, and ESOL district coordinators), and staff from the area Migrant Education Program (MEP). Findings reveal two major themes: differing ideologies of communication, and confounding roles and responsibilities among study participants regarding communication processes and practices. The study found that families that are (im)migrant have unique needs that require nontraditional outreach efforts and communication practices. We discuss implications for education professionals working with this population.

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Introduction

The current sociopolitical climate toward immigrants in the United States is under heated debate, both by advocates of liberal immigration policies and those opposed to immigrants crossing U.S. borders. However, few can deny the contributions of immigrants to the U.S. economy, whose labor fulfills economic needs in low-paying industries. In fact, recent data suggest that immigrants represent more than one-fifth of all low-wage workers in the U.S. and represent almost half of all workers without a high-school education (Capps, Fortuny, & Fix, 2007).

One subgroup of low-wage earners consists of migrant farmworkers, those who work in agriculture and related industries (namely dairy and fishing) and follow seasonal harvests in pursuit of labor. While not all migrant workers are immigrants to the U.S., an estimated 78% are. Moreover, of those who are migrant workers, 85% are Spanish-speakers and 75% are born in Mexico [U.S. Department of Labor (U.S. DOL), 2005]. The work of migrants is labor-intensive, inconsistent (due to seasonality), and frequently hazardous. Furthermore, migrant workers earn poverty-level wages with an estimated median income of less than $10,000 per year (U.S. DOL, 2005).

The Florida Context

Florida is home to between 200,000 and 350,000 of the U.S.'s estimated 2.5 million migrant farmworkers (Riley, 2002), though exact data are difficult to obtain due to the nature of migrant work. Many of these workers harvest seasonal crops, such as oranges, in the southern region of the state. North Florida is home to an increasing number of migrant farmworkers who work in the peanut, hay, dairy, and blueberry industries. The children of migrant workers qualify for federal supplemental educational assistance under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), provided they move across school-district lines more frequently than every 36 months, while their parents follow seasonal, agricultural work (Pappamihiel, 2004). Migrant children are frequently poor, come from Spanish-speaking homes, and experience high rates of mobility, all of which negatively impact their educational experiences and academic achievement. Thus, the ways in which schools outreach to families, including use of both linguistically and culturally appropriate programs and practices, affect the educational experiences of non-native-English-speaking migrant children.

In 2006–2007 there were 38,047 students, from Pre-Kindergarten to grade 12, who qualified and received migrant assistance in Florida [Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Student Assistance, personal communication, November 15, 2007]. Many of the migrant students are native Spanish speakers and qualify for ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) services as well. Moreover, in Florida, there are approximately 250,000 English

language learners (ELLs) in public schools, about 75% of whom are Spanish-speakers [Florida State Department of Education (FL DOE, 2007; MacDonald, 2004). Most of these students participate in mainstream educational settings, as outlined under the Florida Consent Decree (FL DOE, 1990). The Decree was the 1990 result of a legal case between a coalition of Florida organizations that sued the state of Florida, arguing that the state's failure to provide adequately trained teachers for ELLs resulted in those students' poor academic performance. The state agreed to mandate ESOL preparation for new and practicing teachers in a language-program model referred to as "inclusion" (MacDonald, 2004). In that model, the most widespread and preferred program type in Florida, ELLs are placed in mainstream classrooms (MacDonald, 2004) with a specially trained teacher. As a result of the Decree, Institutes of Higher Education took several years to design and begin implementation of the teacher-training program for ELLs, with the first cohorts graduating in the early 2000s. However, there is a dearth of research regarding the effectiveness of the inclusion model in terms of its influence on the achievement of ELLs in the state of Florida, though a large-scale, longitudinal study is currently underway (deJong, Coady, & Harper, 2007).

Overview of the Study

The impetus for the current study came from a home-literacy initiative, *Libros de Familia*, in which student volunteers from a public university brought bilingual books to Spanish-speaking migrant children and provided literacy support (Coady, 2008). In the course of that project, student volunteers frequently stated that they were asked to provide communication services (translation, interpretation, and advocacy) on behalf of families who were both migrant and immigrant. We were curious about the ways in which school communication with these families took place. As we investigated home–school communication, we noted that the combination of being simultaneously migrant and immigrant posed interesting issues and challenges for educators. In order to represent the unique characteristics of the group, in this paper we use the term *(im)migrant* when referring to families that are both migrant and immigrant.

While prior research has examined home–school communication with culturally and linguistically diverse families, few studies have focused on those who are both migrant and immigrant. Thus, this study attempts to understand the home–school communication policies and practices and unique needs of (im)migrant families in two school districts in Florida. Furthermore, while other research has presented limited perspectives or has focused on a specific program, this study includes findings from interviews with a broad range of stakeholders. This research adds to the current literature on home–school communication with Spanish-speaking (im)migrant parents.

The study was guided by two broad research questions: (1) In what ways do educators and school personnel communicate with Spanish-speaking (im)migrant parents and vice versa?, and (2) In what ways do programs, such as the Migrant Education Program (MEP) and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), facilitate home–school communication to support children's educational experiences? We used qualitative research methods (interviews, observations, and document analysis) with key stakeholders [the MEP, a federally funded supplemental educational program for migrant students; ESOL (also referred to nationally as ESL); district coordinators from two counties; parents; bilingual aides; and ESOL and mainstream teachers]. Below we turn to a review of literature that presents a theoretical framework that guided this study, as well as empirical research from scholars who have investigated home–school communication with migrant or Spanish-speaking families.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Paradigms toward minority languages

Educators and scholars understand the importance and potential benefits of home–school communication, particularly as it affects parental involvement and the academic achievement of children in school (Epstein, 2001). This is especially the case with families from nonmainstream backgrounds who speak a language other than English in the home (Delgado-Gaitán, 1991). Despite research that shows how schools' affirmation of students' home language and culture can facilitate student engagement and learning, schools continue to perceive students' home language and culture as beneficial only when they match those of the school (Cummins, 2001).

Ruíz (1984) presents a framework for understanding language orientations toward minority-language use in the U.S. The framework not only delineates three paradigms (language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource), but it further underscores how responses to each of these three paradigms play out in educational and social settings. In the first paradigm, language-as-problem, educational programs that prohibit the use of the first language in school are a response to a widespread language policy orientation that views the use of minority languages as a problem to be solved. Ruíz suggests that the language-as-problem paradigm is more pervasive than one would believe. He states:

> Whether the orientation is represented by malicious attitudes resolving to eradicate, invalidate, quarantine, or inoculate, or comparatively benign ones concerned with remediation and "improvement," the

> central activity remains that of problem-solving. And, since language problems are never merely language problems . . . this particular orientation . . . may be representative of a more general outlook on cultural and social diversity. (1984, p. 21)

Ruíz's second orientation, language-as-right, essentially reflects how minority languages are afforded legal and legislative support, with the intention of this orientation to promote a society that is equitable and just. One example of a language-as-right paradigm is the right to use the ethnic language in legal proceedings. Finally, the third paradigm, language-as-resource, goes beyond protecting the minority language to promote its use in social and educational settings. The intention underlying a language-as-resource approach may be merely to reconcile a "deficiency in language capability," (Ruíz, 1984, p. 26) or to promote bilingualism to aid in learning skills and concepts. This orientation views minority-language communities as sources of knowledge and expertise. From an educational perspective, such an orientation would affirm language-minority students' identities such that learning, connected to students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, is enhanced.

The three-dimensional paradigm proposed by Ruíz situates language and educational policies and practices and provides a framework for understanding home–school communication policies between stakeholders (e.g., school districts, teachers, administrators) and parents or caregivers. In this study, we were interested in the ways that (im)migrant Spanish-speaking parents of children enrolled in public schools communicated with schools and vice versa; we did not focus on children's experiences in this study. We now turn to a review of research related to home–school communication with migrant or Spanish-speaking parents in the U.S. and legal policies affecting home–school communication. We refer to participants as "Spanish-speaking" to reflect their dominant language. The term "Hispanic" is used in this paper when authors and study participants use this term; we do not alter the original.

Empirical Research

Home–school communication and Spanish-speaking families

Numerous studies describe the challenges and successes of home–school communication practices with Spanish-speaking families. In a study of both Hispanic immigrant and migrant families, Sosa (1997) researched the factors that affected parental involvement and collaborative relationships between families and schools. She cited a variety of logistical barriers that inhibited communication and parental involvement (time, money, safety, childcare), as well as attitudinal factors (uncertainty of parents' role in their children's education, their perceived inability to assist in their children's

homework, and communication barriers with the school). Sosa suggested that school information be sent home in two languages (English and Spanish), and that schools provide ongoing language interpreters and translators at school functions and in the broader community at fundraisers and festivals. She pointed to the unique needs of each of those populations. Sosa's work underscores findings from Barrera and Warner (2006), which suggest that schools should recognize parents' work schedules and busy lives, and they should attempt to minimize miscommunication due to language differences.

Similarly, Pappas (1997) investigated home–school partnerships with Latino families. She found that parents' views of their role in their child's education affected both communication and partnerships between the home and school. One major deterrent to participation was parents' inability to understand English. Based on her findings, Pappas encouraged nontraditional approaches to fostering partnerships, including intergenerational meetings that included extended family members.

Migrant families that are non-native-English speakers face additional challenges in school settings, as noted above. Thus, for this group, the linguistic and cultural factors that affect communication between the home and school can be exacerbated due to families' migratory lifestyle, immigration status, poverty, and a rural community setting. Several studies have specifically investigated communication between Spanish-speaking migrant families and schools. In one such study conducted over a period of 4 years, Brunn (1999) investigated school language policy and its effects on Mexican-origin migrant children. He found that because the school had no language policy per se, teachers felt that they lacked the knowledge to best support students' learning, and students' language was not used as a resource. Similarly, López, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha (2001) investigated parental involvement at four migrant-impacted schools over a 5-month period. They found that schools needed to be acutely aware of migrant families' needs and to interact with them on a "more personal level" (p. 261). Moreover, effective communication occurred collaboratively, holistically, and in nontraditional ways, such as through radio announcements, television, and phone calls, rather than through flyers from the school and other related educational-support programs and services (e.g., MEP, special education, and bilingual programs). Findings from that study underscored López's (2004) edict to bring the "mountain to Mohammad," or services directly to migrant families rather than the reverse.

Advancing a critical perspective of home-school communication, Delgado-Gaitán (1991) argued that home–school communication reflects specific power relations between those two groups. In her study of Spanish-speaking parents in a southern California school district, Delgado-Gaitán described how some parents in the district participated in meetings held by the MEP, while others participated in preschool-program activities. She noted that between 10–25% of migrant parents participated in bimonthly MEP meetings,

conducted in Spanish and lasting for about 1 hour, which informed them of school activities and provided speakers on social programs addressing families' needs. In contrast, the preschool outreach program, in which consistent and systematic training efforts and activities took place, was more successful among Spanish-speaking parents. Delgado-Gaitán concluded that nontraditional outreach and communication activities may be required by migrant Spanish-speaking parents for schools and homes to form robust partnerships that benefit children.

The above studies suggest that nontraditional outreach programs are essential when working with migrant, immigrant families. The unique needs of this population (difficulty understanding roles and responsibilities within the education system, language, poverty, and mobility) affect children's school experiences. Findings from the studies reviewed here reveal the following guidelines when working with this population: open meetings to extended family members; provide interpreters and translators at in- and out-of-school functions; build personal relationships; bring services directly to families; and establish clear policies and procedures that support communication in families' first language.

Policy

Legislating language in home–school communication

Educational policies at the federal level frame non-native-English-speaking parents as problematic, i.e., they "lack" the appropriate language to communicate with schools. However, such policies fall under the "language-as-right" paradigm delineated by Ruíz (1984). For example, Title I, Part A of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 legislated the role of State Education Agencies (SEAs) in using the home language for communication wherever this is duly feasible. Under the Act, communication guidelines stipulate that districts provide information to parents ". . . in an understandable and uniform format and, to the extent practicable, in a language that the parent can understand" (NCLB, 2001). For widely spoken minority languages such as Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Portuguese—Florida's three most widely spoken minority languages—communication with parents could easily be facilitated in the language of the home (FL DOE, n.d.). That is, these languages are largely represented in communities throughout the state in which interpreters and translators may be found.

For their part, the Florida Department of Education has espoused a Parent Involvement Plan that follows the guidelines of NCLB through its Bureau of Family and Community Outreach (FL DOE, 2006a). The plan includes a series of state-level goals intended to foster and facilitate communication with homes and parental involvement in children's education. While the plan officially delineates steps for school districts to take to promote communication, the document makes only two references to the language in which this type

of communication should occur. Other districts in the United States (e.g., Tucson Unified School District) have been forced to comply with federal laws regarding using the home language for communication with parents under the NCLB Act [U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE), 2002].

Next, we present the methods used and findings from the study. We then link the data findings to the theoretical framework outlined above. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for educators and stakeholders working with this population.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were recruited from two school districts in north Florida; pseudonyms have replaced the names of all people and places. Participants included parents in three households (representing four families); the Director of the MEP as well as its Academic Coordinator; teachers; and support staff (two bilingual aides). We refer to the two districts as "Fairfield" and "Crestview," and their ESOL coordinators, "Harvey Thornton" and "Martha Shelburne" respectively. Participating families were identified based on (a) home-language use (Spanish); and (b) children qualifying for services under the MEP within the past year.

While Fairfield School District is located in a rural area with a total population of less than 10,000 students, Crestview School District is in a semirural setting with a significantly larger student population of approximately 30,000 (FL DOE, 2006b). Based on data from the local Migrant Education Program's 2007 Census, Fairfield had a total of 193 migrant students, of which approximately 48% were considered immigrant and 52% were considered nonimmigrant. Further, of the 193 students, 23% (45) were designated ESOL. While Crestview only had 55 migrant students, there was a larger proportion of immigrant students (80%), and 42% (23) received ESOL services.

Parents qualified for participation in the study on the basis that they spoke Spanish as their primary language in the home, and their children qualified to receive MEP services. In addition, all of the families arrived in the U.S. within the previous 3 years. The study used convenience sampling to select the participants. Therefore, rapport had been previously established with the parents, as at least one interviewer had had prior experiences working with at least one family in the *Libros de Familia* project.

Participating households included two families from Mexico and one from Costa Rica (See Table 1). There were eight children total among the three households, ages 11–16. Parents worked in various local industries, which at the time of the interviews included the dairy, watermelon, plant nursery, and lumber industries. The Costa Rican family's dynamics were

Table 1
Family Demographics

Family	Olivas	Castillo	Suárez
# of Children (ages)	4 (11,15,16,16)	1 (11)	3 (12,14,16)
Country of Origin	Costa Rica	Mexico	Mexico
Work Industry	Dairy/Watermelon	Plant Nursery	Lumber

unique in that there were two related families in one household, comprised of a brother and sister with their own respective children living together.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a 6-month period using home observations, interviews, field notes, and document analysis. Semistructured interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour each, were conducted with all participants, with two interviewers per household or participant. Open-ended questions allowed participants to illustrate their experiences, and follow-up questions were posed for clarification and elaboration. In addition, parent interviews were conducted in Spanish. The authors assume all responsibility for translation from Spanish to English.

A set of interview questions that reflected home–school communication practices were developed a priori based on our experiences in the *Libros de Familia* home-literacy project. From these, three sets of questions were designed to fit the context of the participants and investigate their specific roles. Sample questions included, "What types of information does the MEP and ESOL program communicate with the students' homes?" And, "In what ways do schools communicate with migrant parents, and vice-versa?" All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Open coding, which allowed for themes to be generated based on critical terms, patterns, and key events, was used to isolate and subsequently group data. One example of this was data that supported the theme of nontraditional forms of communication and how this occurred—*personalmente*. Data were grouped into categories, and new data were analyzed and compared with those in existing categories to determine if they aligned or if additional categories needed to be created. The researchers met regularly to discuss emerging themes in the data and how new data across sources affirmed or refuted the categories. Data were triangulated between home observations, interviews, field notes, and document analysis. Data were cross- and member-checked to verify the information and ensure validity of the findings. Data analysis yielded two salient themes: differing definitions

of communication among study participants, and confounding roles and responsibilities.

Findings

Differing Definitions of Communication

Our study's first major finding revealed a discrepancy between home–school communication expectations and practices among district ESOL coordinators, teachers, parents, and the local MEP. First, Fairfield School District's ESOL coordinator's role and view of communication contrasted sharply with that espoused by Crestview. Those views further conflicted with teachers' understanding of communication practices within the district, as well as parents' ideology regarding home–school communication practices.

Fairfield's ESOL district coordinator, Harvey Thornton, emphasized the need to proactively communicate with ESOL parents, who in his district are Spanish-dominant. He noted the special needs of migrant families, which included requiring nontraditional outreach such as meetings held on Saturdays for parents who work long hours during the week. For translation and interpretation, Mr. Thornton maintained that these services should not be limited to state and federal documents, asserting "Simply translating notes home is not enough," although this was usually the case. He continued to express the necessity of developing parent-outreach programs to create an atmosphere of belonging for migrant parents who were outside the mainstream. In his district, Mr. Thornton utilized ESOL aides to facilitate translation and interpretation services as well as parent outreach initiatives. Furthermore, Mr. Thornton organized an annual event with the aim to communicate available services for parents in the district whose children qualify for ESOL. However, the parent turnout was small, with less than a dozen families attending.

In contrast to Mr. Thornton's views and practices, his counterpart in the Crestview District, Martha Shelburne, promoted a different idea of home–school communication. According to Ms. Shelburne, because some of the schools in her district were located in the same city as a university, most households whose children qualified for ESOL had at least one parent who understood English. Like Mr. Thornton, she held an annual information session regarding available ESOL services, but the attendees were primarily English proficient.

The remaining home–school communication in the Crestview District consisted of document translation and oral interpretation conducted on an individual basis and typically occurring only a "couple times per year" for the entire district. Ms. Shelburne explained the process for parents seeking these services: First, parents would contact their child's teacher; second, the

teacher would contact the school principal; third, the principal would then notify the school's ESOL contact person; and fourth, the ESOL contact would contact Ms. Shelburne, the district coordinator. If teachers wished to translate a document and bypass this lengthy process, Ms. Shelburne indicated that there were computerized translation services available to the district's teachers, naming the TransACT software. TransACT is a program that translates state and federal documents into six different languages, including English (TransACT, 2007).

For their part, teachers in this study reported not being familiar with or aware of any computerized translator at their disposal, including TransACT. According to teachers, communication with Spanish-speaking (im)migrant parents overwhelmingly consisted of sending home federal, school, and classroom documents written in English. One teacher showed her empathy for parents who were unable to comprehend such documents:

> All the documents that come from school that are handed out to every student at the beginning of the year are in-depth, difficult things to read for half of the class, let alone for someone that doesn't speak English, and I don't know if they are available in Spanish.

Even those teachers who qualified for a bilingual aide that could assist with translation of documents felt overburdened and discouraged by their students' academic and sociocultural needs. One such ESOL teacher expressed, "We come early, leave late, and work all day here—it can be very frustrating."

A related finding was that teachers were not always aware of which students qualified for ESOL and MEP services. One primary-school teacher related such an occurrence with a migrant student in the current school year. Alerted by his Latin-origin name and recent history of moves as detailed in his file, the teacher suspected that the student might qualify for ESOL or MEP services. However, her suspicions were not confirmed until a volunteer tutor with connections to the MEP began working with the student. The tutor informed the teacher that the student met the criteria for accommodations on standardized tests, namely the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), a test developed to comply with NCLB (FL DOE, 2003). Accommodations, which included flexible scheduling, timing, setting, and/or use of a translation dictionary, were determined at the school level and implemented by the Curriculum Resource Teacher (CRT), test coordinator, or guidance counselor. Thus, had the tutor not advocated on the student's behalf, he may not have received test accommodations or other mandated services.

Parents in this study revealed a strong preference toward in-person, human communication, or communicating *"personalmente*," as opposed to less direct and mediated forms of contact, such as letters, phone calls, or e-mails. Parents also voiced their desire for interpreters at school meetings

and documents translated into Spanish, in particular for subjects regarding their children's academic performance and behavior. Furthermore, because of cultural differences, parents expressed the dilemma of not understanding information about the American school system that others take for granted. For instance, one mother, Ms. Olivas, recalled her difficulties and said that parents:

> *. . . tienen que entender que es una 'A,' que es una 'B,' que es una 'C,' cuando es que sus hijos están mal, y cuando tienen que empezar a preocuparse sus records.*
>
> . . . need to know what is an 'A,' what is a 'B,' what is a 'C,'when their children are not doing well, and when they should begin to worry about their grades.

Ms. Olivas expressed her lack of comprehension of an issue as fundamental as the U.S. grading system, which differs from the *calificaciones* system used in most Latin American countries. In Mexico, for example, a number grading system from 1–10 is used rather than letter grades.

Of the key stakeholders, the study revealed that the MEP utilized the most diverse range of home–communication practices, including periodic home visits, telephone calls, and mailed letters, with the majority of contact conducted in person. When the MEP could not reach a family at their residence, staff—called "advocates"—contacted the student at school in order to arrange a home visit. The director of the MEP, Julia Bernard, recognized the complications involved in communicating with migrant families, including their heavy work schedules, a mobile lifestyle, and even linguistic and cultural barriers. Despite these obstacles, Ms. Bernard emphasized the imperativeness of making personal contact with the families, asserting:

> It's time consuming, but I truly believe we cannot beat that personal contact. Ideally, in the person's home you can get a feel for where they're coming from, what their issues might be, and the situation that they're living in right there, and it truly may be an opportunity for an advocate to grasp what's going on in that child's life or that family's life.

While the majority of MEP advocates were bilingual and often acted as translators and interpreters for the students and their families, the MEP averaged one staff member to anywhere from 300 to 700 qualified students, which created a shortage in addressing the needs of all students served in the program.

Confounding Roles and Responsibilities

Our study's second major finding reflects the discrepancy between how key stakeholders (ESOL program, teachers, the MEP, and parents) viewed each other's roles and responsibilities in facilitating home–school communication.

Ultimately, the lack of clearly delineated roles and responsibilities impeded the home–school communication process, and stakeholders often unfairly sought out the MEP as the de facto solution.

As previously described, while Crestview District theoretically made available to its teachers the TransACT software, teachers reported no knowledge of a means to access translated documents. Moreover, teachers in this study did not know whom to contact to obtain interpreter services or translated school documents and classroom notes. On the delineation of her translating duties, one ESOL teacher asked, "How much do we do that is not really coming from us? . . . [For instance,] the newsletter coming from school, how involved should we be in getting it translated?"

The study also showed that all parties interviewed relied heavily on the services of the MEP, perhaps because of the program's bilingual nature and the staff's willingness to assist its students and their families. One elementary teacher's response is illustrative: when asked what she would do if she wanted to communicate with a migrant student's parents, she stated:

> I would probably look for some sort of translation or translator . . . I am not sure if the Migrant Education Program always steps in, but they have made it so much easier. If I had a severe situation, I would go to someone like that.

While both districts, from ESOL coordinators down to teachers, reported relying on MEP for translation, interpretation, and other services, the director of MEP described the program's guidelines as "supplemental in nature," as its purpose was to enroll migrant students into the program and provide them academic support, primarily through in-school tutoring. The MEP, a federal program, made it clear that translation and interpretation services were beyond the scope of its legislated duties. Although MEP advocates were consumed with their official responsibilities of providing academic support, the Director of the MEP noted that the advocates spent their discretionary time assisting students and families with translation and interpretation services, helping to fill the void left by the school districts.

Parents viewed communication with schools as their own responsibility. This perspective was influenced by their experiences with school systems in their native country where parents were not necessarily expected to communicate with schools in the same way they are in the U.S. Illustrating this point, one parent noted:

> *La barrera es el idioma. Yo entiendo, pero es una barrera mía, no de la escuela, porque estamos en América y yo soy la que tengo que aprender. Ellos no tienen que aprender español. Es mi problema. Yo lo acepto y lo entiendo. Obviamente sería muy bueno que ellos—para los niños hispanos—mandaran la información en español a la casa. Sería bueno para mí pero no es problema de la escuela.*

> The barrier is language. I understand, but the barrier is mine, not the school's, because we are in America and I am the one who must learn. They don't have to learn Spanish. It is my problem. I accept it and I understand it. Of course it would be good if they—for Hispanic children—sent the information home in Spanish. It would be good for me, but it is not the school's problem.

Each of the families reported seeking out their own translators and interpreters—their children, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, and tutors—to assist in comprehending school documents. However, it was unclear how completely or accurately the translators communicated the content of the documents.

A related finding was the role of key individuals to support the communication process through outreach and nontraditional forms of communication. That is, we found that key individuals voluntarily assumed critical supplemental roles. Interviewees, including parents and school professionals alike, repeatedly mentioned the names of specific individuals in the school system, from the MEP, and within the local community who contributed extra efforts to help the students and their families. These efforts included providing families with material (home items, school supplies), academic (tutoring), and sociocultural (cultural and linguistic brokering) services. The key individuals interviewed in this study took initiative when concerns arose, were proactive in advocating for students and their families in schools and the community, and served as intermediaries for gaps left between the families and the system. For example, the ESOL aide at Crestview School District actively distributed flyers with community resources (e.g., preschool enrollment information and adult English classes) to families in order to provide them with a better understanding of available services.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the theoretical process of communication is a solid relationship, as indicated by a bidirectional line between the key stakeholders (i.e., parents, school, MEP, ESOL). When working with non-native-English-speaking parents, communication theoretically occurs in a language parents understand. However, as this study's data suggest, communication with this (im)migrant subpopulation did not occur as theorized. Single arrows indicate the direction in which communication occurred. While both ESOL district coordinators and schools stated that they communicated primarily through traditional methods and in English, only the Fairfield District used its bilingual aides to outreach *personalmente*, directly contacting (im)migrant parents in Spanish. This type of personal communication occurred inconsistently. In fact, the MEP was the only group to consistently communicate with parents in nontraditional ways and in the families' home language. As Figure 1 shows, parents communicated back with them, as indicated with bidirectional arrows. The data revealed an additional category of stakeholders—key individuals—who communicated

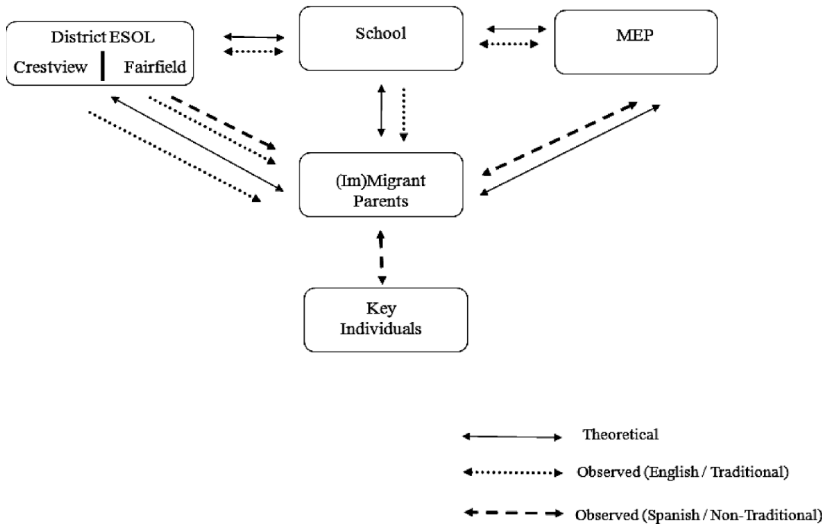

Figure 1. Communication across key stakeholders.

personalmente with the (im)migrant parents in Spanish and through nontraditional means. As a consequence, we found that key individuals filled in many of the communication gaps left by the district.

Interpretation

The findings from this study may be interpreted using the framework proposed by Ruíz (1984). Data reveal that communication practices across study participants were largely informed from a language-as-problem paradigm in which communication with Spanish-speaking (im)migrant families was a problem with which districts were forced to attend. This was most evident at Crestview, where the ESOL coordinator supplied and referred to TransACT software for teachers but did not ensure that teachers had access to nor used it. In addition, Crestview district's recommendations to provide interpreter or translation services underscored that parents should be the ones who initiate the procedure for services; this minimized the district's role and responsibility in providing services for non-English-speaking parents at the outset. The coordinator's assumption that there was at least one English-speaking parent in the home of students was not substantiated; moreover, her assumption about families' language and needs did not ensure that the unique needs of (im)migrant families were being met, even when legislated under NCLB.

For their part, both parents and teachers also appeared to operate under a language-as-problem orientation. Teachers underscored a deficit view of the families when they reported that the conditions under which they would

contact the MEP for assistance would have to be "severe," and only when necessary. Parents' words were perhaps the most indicative of this view when they described communication as "*mi problema*/my problem," rather than a process of establishing rich and robust partnerships that support children's education from which all participants benefit (Amatea, 2008). Data from this study underscored Ruiz's observation regarding the pervasiveness of a deficit ideology and the subtle ways in which that ideology influenced practices in schools. In turn, parents internalized and adopted that same view.

The language-as-right orientation was exemplified through the MEP services, which, like NCLB, is a legislated program or act. The Director of the MEP understood her obligation to provide services to families, but these were intended to supplement districts' work. Interestingly, while NCLB espouses a policy to support home–school communication in families' home language, Spanish-speaking migrant parents were unaware of the school's obligation to provide outreach in terms of the language of communication. It is incumbent upon districts to communicate in ways and through languages that parents and caregivers understand. However, as revealed in this study, simply because a state develops and delineates a plan to do so does not ensure compliance with the law, nor does it ensure that minority languages will be viewed as resources in the community.

It is with key individuals, i.e., a few teachers and aides, in which communication through outreach occurred *personalmente*. These key individuals utilized nontraditional outreach methods to meet the needs of the (im)migrant students and their families and saw the experiences of (im)migrant children as resources that enhanced their classrooms and the community. Generally the services and outreach filled families' immediate needs of housing, food, and clothing. However, these key individuals could not fill all of the gaps, and there remained a need for a clear explanation of the educational system (procedures such as grading, conferencing, and even school calendars), as well as the development of relationships with families on a more consistent basis.

Implications and Suggestions

The findings from this study elucidate implications to improve communication and provide educational services for Spanish-speaking (im)migrant families. Similar to the findings of Brunn (1999), the first step in communication is to clearly understand the needs of nonmainstream families and to subsequently delineate roles and responsibilities in the district that support effective communication and partnership building. In this study we realized the need for districts to communicate with all parents while seeking to understand the particular challenges of this (im)migrant subgroup, especially around language and culture, mobility, and poverty. Leaders in key roles

could initiate proactive, rather than reactive, communication strategies with (im)migrant households. One way to do that could be with a home–school liaison who works directly with (im)migrant families. Another example is to provide professional development to teachers in the district regarding the needs of the population and procedures that will facilitate home–school communication. Ultimately, it appeared that each individual ESOL director's perspectives and attitudes affected the delivery of services to its students and families.

The study's findings also underscore the need for nontraditional communication strategies and outreach—to communicate more *personalmente*. While the ESOL district coordinators organized annual informational events for parents, these events must respond to families' lifestyles in a way similar to that advocated by Pappas (1997) and Delgado-Gaitán (1991). Due to migrant families' characteristic mobility—including a tendency to arrive after the start of the school year from the later picking season in the North—holding similar events several key times per year could greatly benefit educators and families alike. Also, as parent turnout is typically low at these meetings, districts could initiate culturally appropriate strategies such as inviting extended family members (Pappas, 1997), especially in the case of parents who work long hours and may not be available. In any case, even when traditional strategies are used—such as sending flyers home with children, as observed in this study—communication should occur in the language of the parents.

The confounding roles and responsibilities identified in this study further suggest that educators are uncertain about the characteristics and needs of families who are (im)migrant, that is, those who are simultaneously migrant and immigrant. This means that students and families may not receive services for which they qualify. For example, one elementary teacher did not discover, until by chance several months into the academic year, that one of her students qualified for both ESOL and MEP services. This example illustrates both the limited understanding of the characteristics of this population, as well as the miscommunication between key stakeholders or school officials that occurred.

In this study, key individuals met needs that should have been addressed by other stakeholders. However, it is the school's duty to ensure that language-minority parents have equitable access to school information, as outlined in NCLB (2001). We found that the (im)migrant families who participated in this study who live in rural, agricultural areas fell under the district's radar. This made establishing personal relationships more difficult due to the rural nature of outreach. However, as López (2004) suggests, bringing services to migrant families is a crucial aspect of working with the population.

Finally, we suggest that schools identify the language needs of parents, perhaps through personal telephone calls, with the aim of determining the

language(s) in which parents wish to communicate with the schools, thus moving toward building partnerships that support children's education. Because not all migrant (MEP-qualified) students qualify for ESOL services, within the current system a school has no way of ascertaining parents' language needs. Understanding the needs of this population is crucial to ensuring high-quality education for children.

Conclusion

This study investigated home–school communication policies and practices among educators and (im)migrant families in rural and suburban settings in north Florida. The families in this study faced a unique combination of factors that affected the parents' ability to communicate with school personnel and vice versa. The ill effects of poverty, mobility, immigration to the U.S., and linguistic and cultural differences experienced by this subgroup meant that communication between stakeholders was crucial to understand and meet the needs of students. However, teachers were uncertain of the roles and responsibilities of supplemental services (MEP and ESOL) and were unaware of how to meet students' needs. Some teachers and administrators also operated from a "language-as-problem" paradigm (Ruíz, 1984), and parents appeared to adopt this ideology as well.

Despite an apparently growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. (Crawford, 2000), there exists legislation that is intended to support all children in U.S. schools (e.g., Plyler v. Doe, 1982) and to assist teachers and children (e.g., ESOL and MEP). Simply offering these services, however, does not ensure access to them. Ensuring equitable educational opportunities for (im)migrant students in U.S. public schools requires that educators understand the unique needs of this group and employ two-way communication policies and practices that foster personal relationships to support children's education.

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