What parents in adult education programs say about their child's education:

Preliminary **findings from an 18-month case study**

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Introduction

Parents play a critical role in a child's education. Yet schools often struggle to substantively partner with parents who have limited English proficiency (e.g., Auerbach, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Vera, et. al., 2012). Productive school-family relations begin with an awareness of the perspective of each partner (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). Understanding is essential to building and sustaining trust. Relational trust, in turn, has been shown to facilitate positive outcomes for students and the school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Schutz, 2006; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009).

Educators and parents can vary substantially in how they conceive the roles each plays in student learning (e.g., Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Lareau, 1989). Differences are further amplified when parents raised in another country enroll their child. Furthermore, educators are often unaware of the steps parents take outside of school to support their child's education (Auerbach, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Shiffman, 2013). As the number of immigrant families enrolling children in American schools continues to grow, it is essential that educators learn how parents perceive their role and the school's role in a child's education, what supports parents identify as helpful, and what concerns parents.

This paper examines parent perceptions of their child's educational experience among adult students enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes offered by a regional adult education program in Virginia. The research questions guiding this paper are: 1) How do parents articulate their role and the school role in their child's education? 2) What school-sponsored efforts do parents identify as supporting their child's education? 3) And, what school-focused concerns do parents raise regarding their child's education? Data are drawn from

an 18-month case study that investigated connections between adult education participation and parent engagement in education.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the family engagement literature to identify areas in which parents are likely to play a role in a child's education (Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005; Jeynes, 2010). Parent engagement is conceptualized as actions and beliefs that support a child's learning. This engagement may be manifested at school, outside of school, or in communication between school and home (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2006/2007; Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008; Epstein, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, et. al., 2005; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Sheldon, 2002). Parental approaches to supporting a child's education are influenced by how parents construct their role; self-efficacy in carrying out this role; perceived invitations from the school and child; and parent knowledge, experiences, and relationships (Auerbach, 2007; Coleman, 1988; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey, et. al., 2005; Lareau, 1989; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

Parent-teacher communication and assistance with homework are two widely recognized areas in which parents play a role. Parent-school communication helps bridge a child's life at home and at school (Epstein, 1992). Parents and educators may meet in formally structured events such as parent-teacher conferences and informally on an as-needed basis. Parent-school communication occurs via face-to-face encounters, by phone, and through written communication. A large majority of parents in the 2012 National Household Education Surveys (NHES) reported that schools communicated with them through general newsletters, memos, email, and other notices (Noel, Stark, & Redford, 2015). A smaller percentage of parents reported receiving school notes, emails, and phone calls about a specific student.

Providing assistance with homework is also a widely recognized activity, and is a commonly reported practice by parents (Noel, et. al., 2015). However, both positive and negative impacts have been associated with parent involvement in homework (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong, & Jones, 2001; Patall, Cooper, Robinson, & Van Voorhis, 2011). Positive impacts include creating the conditions for children to complete homework such as reducing distractions, directing children's attention to important aspects of the homework experience, and providing opportunities for the parent and child to talk about homework and school. Negative impacts include frustration generated for the parent and/or child, tension between a parent and child, and inappropriate assistance such as doing the homework for the child or providing incorrect information and strategies.

Methods

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from an 18-month study that employed a multiple embedded case study design (Yin, 2014). The larger study explored the ways in which enrollment in ESOL and GED Preparation classes informed parent beliefs and actions associated with supporting their child's education. Between spring 2014 and summer 2015, the study was conducted at a regional program enrolling over 1,000 adult education students at multiple rural, suburban, and small city locations across several Virginia counties. This region has seen a large increase in the number of immigrants over the past 20 years. School districts in this area have faced a significant learning curve as they refine how to support students and families who are not native English speakers.

Data Collection

For this paper, primary data sources are semi-structured interviews with 14 adult ESOL students who are parents of a child enrolled in pre-K through 12th grade. Secondary data sources

include: items from a program-wide parent survey conducted by the author; school and district websites; and observation notes taken from ESOL class discussions in which parent engagement and schools were specific topics.

Parent Interviews

During the 2014-2015 academic year, four ESOL class locations were purposefully selected for in-depth examination. This study included classroom observations; interviews with parents, adult education instructors and staff, as well as K-12 educators in the surrounding area; and analysis of curricular materials. The class locations were selected to represent a variety of geographic locations, facilities, and times of day. ESOL instructors at four locations invited me to visit their class and introduce the study to parents. The 14 adult students interviewed were enrolled at one of these four ESOL locations.

Interviews with parents explored experiences with the local schools, parent roles, and connections between participation in adult education classes and supporting a child's education. Twelve parent interviews were conducted in English. These parents were enrolled in intermediate or advanced level ESOL classes. These participants often made grammatical errors in responding to the interview questions. In this paper, the quotes are presented verbatim in order to keep the interviewees' voice and meaning intact. Two interviews were conducted in Spanish with assistance from an interpreter—the ESOL coordinator or a fellow student. These two parents were in a beginning level ESOL class and identified an indigenous language as their first language. They speak Spanish but are not literate in any language. I asked questions in English. The interpreter then translated the question and the parent interviewee's response. A professional service also translated the Spanish portions of the audiotape.

The 14 ESOL students interviewed included 12 mothers and two fathers with an average age of 40. Twelve parents are Spanish speakers from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. One parent emigrated from Africa and speaks French. The other parent emigrated from Europe and speaks Russian. Parents' prior education ranges from no formal education to graduate degrees. The parents have lived in the mainland U.S. for at least a few years; the majority has lived in the U.S. for 10 years or more.

Of the 14 parents, 12 had children enrolled in a public school in one of three school districts during the 2014-2015 school year. Eight parents had at least one child in elementary school; six parents had at least one child in middle school; and three parents had at least one child in high school. In fall 2015, three parents planned to enroll their child in kindergarten and one parent planned to enroll her daughter in the high school when she arrives in the U.S. and is reunited with her mother.

Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data sources provide additional information about the broader scope of parent-reported beliefs and perceptions throughout the regional program. These secondary sources include two items from a program-wide parent survey, classroom observations, and school district websites.

In spring 2015, a paper survey was distributed to all students attending ESOL classes during two class sessions. The survey included an existing scale that measures parent involvement role activity beliefs developed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2005). The scale was originally designed for parents of elementary school students and uses a 6-point likert scale ranging from Disagree Very Strongly (1) to Agree Very Strongly (6). The role activity beliefs cover commonly identified parent responsibilities for education. The survey was available in

English and Spanish. Using a script, adult education instructors administered the survey to

students during two class meetings.   In a few cases in which Spanish-speaking students were not

literate in Spanish or English, the ESOL coordinator orally administered the survey and recorded

student responses. For the ESOL program, 198 surveys were returned—a 73% response rate.

Approximately 45% of the returned surveys (89) were completed by parents of school-age

children.

Observation data in which parent engagement and the schools were specifically discussed

provide another source of information for this paper. This data is drawn from approximately 70

hours of classroom observations across five ESOL class locations. Finally, I reviewed district

and school websites attended by the children of several parents interviewed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by the paper's theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009). The parent

interview transcripts were coded according to themes identified in the literature and those that

emerged during the study that address the research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These

initial codes focused on parent role, school role, parent concerns, and parent-identified supports.

An open coding approach was used to sub-code the interview data within each of these four

categories. The analysis involved identifying patterns and discrepancies in the interview

responses. Simple descriptive statistics from the survey concerning role activity beliefs,

classroom observation notes, and website analysis provided additional sources of information to

triangulate issues parents raised during interviews.

Preliminary Findings

Among the interviewees and survey respondents, all parents believed they had a role in

supporting their child's education. Most of the parents interviewed explained that one of the

reasons they study English is to support their child's education. On the survey, a large majority of parents identified communicating with the school, assisting with homework, and talking with their child about school as their responsibility. What that responsibility meant in practice, however, varied among the parents interviewed. Some parents described a role that primarily involved complying with school requests for parent assistance. Other parents described a more proactive role managing their child's educational experience that included seeking and securing resources from school and elsewhere to support their child's learning and development, advocating for their child with the school, creating additional learning opportunities outside of school, and planning for college.

Parent priorities for education as well as the skills and strategies used to support children's education also varied. Those parents with some post-secondary education and one parent who had earned her GED in the U.S. appeared more comfortable and agile in taking a leadership role in their child's education. This leadership role encompassed critically considering the pedagogical and curricular approaches of the school and teachers; initiating meetings with the school staff and voicing concerns; and actively seeking out additional supports at the school, in the community, and on the Internet.

Parent perceptions of the school's role were gleaned indirectly through parent accounts of what schools do as it relates to their child. The perceived school role included providing instruction; monitoring student learning; and communicating with parents to provide information about student progress, supports, and school news. Parents also described institutional functions of the school—such as scheduling parent teacher conferences and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. They also cited setting and enforcing school rules and procedures.

Concerns related to their child's learning centered on parents' self-efficacy to communicate with school staff, the nature and pace of the instruction, the amount of homework, the extent to which their child's needs were recognized and met, and access to and the nature of learning supports. The school-related supports for learning identified by parents were inherently relational in nature. These supports centered on language assistance—both written and spoken; demonstrated responses to parent concerns; attention of key individuals in the school or school system; and care for the whole child.

Two kinds of parent engagement appeared frequently in the data: parent-school communication and homework support. These two areas are also commonly identified spaces for parent-school interaction in practice and research (Noel, et. al., 2015). Closer exploration of these specific spaces in which parent engagement occurs can illuminate the interplay of perceived parent and school roles, school supports, and concerns. This examination can offer insights for school leaders and students in leadership preparation programs regarding how to support parent engagement in these areas.

Parent-School Communication

Communication with school staff, particularly a child's teacher, was widely recognized among the adult ESOL students in this program as something parents should do to support their child's education. Over 94% of the ESOL parents completing the survey responded that they "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the statement, "I believe it's my responsibility to communicate with my child's teacher regularly." Among parents interviewed, many specifically referenced the need to communicate with the school or teacher as a motivator for enrolling in ESOL classes.

Communication between the parent and teacher or other school staff members occurred during routinely scheduled parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings, when children had academic or behavior-related issues, and when parents needed assistance to understand a child's homework assignments. The majority of the communication described by parents appeared to be teacher- or school-initiated. However, five parents described additional efforts they initiated when they were concerned about their child's academic progress, wanted to access additional supports for their child, or needed more information.

The oral and written communication challenges described by parents have distinct features. Parents discussed forms of parent-school communication—face-to-face meetings and phone calls with school staff, and written notes and electronic exchanges. Some parents were more comfortable communicating in person; others preferred communicating in written form. These preferences centered on parents' self-efficacy in spoken and written English. Those parents with lower literacy skills faced significant difficulty communicating in writing. However, a mother with post-secondary education was also reluctant to communicate via email because she was self-conscious about her English grammar. In contrast, another mother with a bachelors degree struggled with pronunciation and was much more comfortable with written English.

In-Person and Phone Interactions

During in-person meetings with teachers and other education professionals, many parents relied on interpreters to facilitate communication. For parents less proficient in English, having an interpreter reduced parent anxiety about communicating with the teacher and other school staff. One father, who never attended school in his home country, was relieved to be greeted by a Spanish-speaking interpreter when he registered his daughter for kindergarten. He explained in

Spanish, "We feel safe because someone will help you and explain to you better." While access to an interpreter is important, parents preferred—when possible—to communicate directly with the teacher or rely on a spouse to interpret. This is indicative of a desire to independently communicate adult to adult, and in some cases a concern that the interpreter might not accurately convey what the parent wanted to say. However, communicating independently required additional time and patience. Some parents raised the concern that the short time slots for parent-teacher conferences did not allow enough time for them to express themselves.

Some ESOL parents, particularly those who were not Spanish speakers, observed that there were not as many supports for non-Spanish speakers. One mother who did not speak Spanish explained that when she called the office, a staff member assumed she was a Spanish speaker and forwarded her call to a Spanish-speaking staff member.

The desire to communicate independently and fluently—to understand and be understood—is powerful. And parents wanted to be able to move beyond using child-like phrases. They desired English vocabulary that was adult rather than child-like. One mother, a former teacher, was desperate to manage and advocate for her son with special needs. She measured her progress in English by her perceived ability to understand and be understood at IEP meetings and appointments with therapists. However, during the interviews with me, her English pronunciation remained difficult to understand and there were instances in which I needed to rephrase what I considered to be fairly straightforward questions in multiple ways. This suggests the potential risk of miscommunication that can occur when a parent and educator believe they are clearly understood by the other. This is particularly tricky when the conversation involves navigating the complex legal, medical, and practical terrain of special education services.

Written Communication

Written communication identified by parents included general notices, forms, individual notes, and emails. For several parents, studying English helped them understand written messages sent from school. The father who had no formal education and was in the early stages of learning to read and write in English, enrolled in ESOL classes to help his daughter, "when she starts going to the school with the notes they leave her." (Translated from Spanish).

Email, apps, and the web are so ubiquitous among education professionals as a mode to quickly communicate information that it is easy to forget not everyone has easy access to the Internet. In this study, I found that most parents had cell phones, some were smart phones, but home computer and Internet access and use were highly variable. Some parents with computer and Internet access described using the school website and email to gather information from and communicate with the school. However, others did not have a computer and/or Internet access, and several expressed discomfort operating a computer. In multiple instances during interviews, I asked parents about school websites resources with which they were not familiar.

Written school communication translated into another language can be confusing when the translated document includes words and grammatical structures that are inconsistent with conventions of that language. While online programs, such as Google Translate, can quickly translate written communication into many languages, these programs often have the problems cited above. Websites of the school systems represented in this study had an automatic translation feature. Parents with higher English proficiency preferred written communication in English because they could look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary without needing to make sense of an unusual sentence structure. One Spanish-speaking mother believed the ideal approach is to provide both Spanish and English versions of the information in one document.

Homework

In interviews and the parent survey, homework was widely recognized as something children should have and that parents have a responsibility to oversee. Close to 92% of the ESOL parents responded that they "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with the survey item, "I believe it's my responsibility to help my child with homework." In several interviews, parents specifically identified assisting children with homework as one of the reasons they study English. Parent participants described homework help that ranged from checking to see if homework is completed to actively assisting in the completion of assignments. For example, when asked to describe a parent's role in schoolwork, the mother of a fifth grader responded, "Asking my son every day, [if] he have homework." She also required her son to prioritize homework. "[If] he have homework, 'do your homework first, and after you do your homework, do your responsibilities in the house, and after this you can do whatever want.'" Some parents described a more active instructional role. For example, the mother of middle school and high school students, reads her children's essays. "When they write, do the essay, and all that, I can read and find some mistakes. And help them." Most parent interviewees with a child in preschool or lower elementary school described specific homework assignments that they help their child complete. Parents with limited formal education and/or English language skills reported more difficulties providing substantive homework support as their children advanced beyond early elementary school.

Parent concerns about homework centered on two issues: the parent's self-efficacy to assist in completing assignments and the limited amount of homework their child brought home. Parent interviewees' assessment of their capacity to assist with homework focused on English language ability, familiarity with the subject matter, and in some cases a perception that the

pedagogical approach was too different from the approach they had learned. A mother with an advanced degree felt language was an obstacle to assisting her middle-school aged son, "I can't explain him subjects when I don't know vocabulary." Several parents worried that the way they learned was too different from the way their child was now learning material. For example, the mother who read her children's essays worried that her children might be confused. She explained, "Sometime I try to explain to them the way I learn but the way they learning now and the way I learn is different."

The second concern raised by parents centered on a perception that the amount of homework was insufficient. This issue was raised during four parent interviews and during an observation in which ESOL students met with school district leaders. This concern reflected a general belief among some parents that the amount of homework equated to the amount of learning taking place. Homework also provided parents with information about what their child was learning and how he or she was doing. Finally, some parents believed it was important to have a homework routine to prepare children for more demanding expectations later in their school careers. In the parent interviews, parents of middle school students most often raised these concerns. A father who did not finish secondary school was very worried that his sixth grade son did not have homework. His son was getting good grades but he observed that the child had difficulty writing. He saw a discrepancy between his son's grades and the skills he expected. He struggled to communicate his concerns to the school but did not feel successful. As a solution, he devised a homework assignment involving taking dictation from the Bible. This parent-created assignment was not coordinated with the child's work at school. The mother with an advanced degree was also deeply troubled that her middle school aged son only had homework in math. Without homework in the other subjects, she did not understand the drop in

her son's English grade. His grade seemed inconsistent with the extensive reading she observed her son doing at home for pleasure.

"In math because he has homework, I understand what he's doing sometimes. But for English, I have record now. He's actually "A" student but he has now "B" for English. And teacher writes, 'he's not focusing.' But for what? Every time he needs read every night. But he read huge books. We never have problem with the books.   We always go to library. We have big library in home. But what English he study? What's he doing? I don't know."

These two parents believed their child was having a learning difficulty and saw a disconnect between the child's grades and what the child demonstrated at home. Neither understood the disconnect and struggled to figure out how to address the concern. The absence of homework, they believed, made understanding the disconnect much more difficult.

Conclusion and Implications

Consistent with prior research, the parents enrolled in this ESOL program believed they had a role in their child's education (Herrold & O'Donnell, 2008; Noel, et. al., 2015). In the survey and interviews, most parents said their role included communicating with the school, assisting with homework, and talking to their child about school. The school supports most frequently identified in parent interviews tended to be relational in nature in the forms of efforts to understand and communicate with parents and attention to their child's needs. Concerns centered on their child's academic progress and parents' ability to communicate.

The findings associated with parent-school communication have implications for educators. Access to a school-based interpreter is a critical resource for both parents and the school. This provides families with a level of comfort as well as some assurance that they will understand and be understood. However, it is important to recognize that parents vary in their

desire for language support as they work towards independent communication. At the same time, miscommunication is more possible when an interpreter is not present. Finding a balance between these two competing needs takes sensitivity. In addition, parents with limited English proficiency need more time to express themselves. Schools can schedule longer blocks of time for parent-teacher conferences with parents who are not native English speakers. These preliminary findings also highlight the complexity of communicating in written form. Translating written materials is not as simple as plugging a document into a program. Automated word choices and sentence construction can create unintended confusion.

As a society—and in schools—reliance on technology to convey information quickly and easily is pervasive. Yet, many of the parents interviewed in this study did not regularly use electronic communication other than their cell phone. Many parents lacked computers and/or Internet access. Several had difficulty operating a computer in general while others had difficulty navigating the district or school website to find the information they needed. There are several strategies to address this challenge. First, provide training for parents in how to navigate the school and district websites. Some parents may also need basic training in how to operate the Internet and a computer. Second, design websites with low literacy readers in mind and involve parents in testing the website.   Third, consider communication that can be easily conducted through a cell phone.

The homework concerns raised in this study present important challenges that also speak to communication between home and school. Homework is often considered to be an important component of the learning process in formal education. It provides additional practice on a particular subject or skill. And it is—in many cultures—a deeply ingrained expectation of what it means to go to school. In some sense, it serves as evidence that learning is taking place. Yet,

homework in support of student learning in reality has a long, contested history (Patall, et. al., 2011). Parental assistance with homework also has a mixed impact on student academic outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, et. al., 2001; Patall, et. al., 2001). Irrespective of the pros and cons, educators should consider how homework practices are communicated to parents. Specifically, the decision to assign homework *and* the rationales for that decision need to be discussed with parents particularly when homework is viewed by parents as a critical component of their child's learning.

Another important function of homework is as a vehicle for communicating with parents about what their child is learning and how the child is doing.   This information then allows a parent to adjust what he or she does at home to support their child's learning. Among the parents interviewed, several expressed concern—even anxiety—about the limited homework their child completed at home. This anxiety encompassed a worry that the parent did not know what their child was learning or how to support the child without the information homework assignments provide to the parent. Some were not certain if the school was assigning homework or their child was not doing it. This suggests the need for alternative means of communicating with parents about how the child is doing in addition to grades when homework is not assigned.

The preliminary findings in this paper offer insights for supporting parents who are English language learners. The generalized but pervasive perception that parents play a role in their child's education found in the survey, interviews, and observations is consistent with prior research (Herrold & O'Donnell, 2008). Much of what parents think and do to support their child's education, however, can be largely hidden from educators without concerted steps to engage parents. An enhanced understanding of parent perceptions can strengthen family-school partnerships, supports for individual children, and the school.

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