

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BRIDGING CULTURES CULTURAL BROKERING IN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

THE EQUITABLE PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION RESEARCH PROJECT PUBLICATION SERIES

Decades of research suggest that strong relationships between parents,¹ families, and schools are key to student success.¹ But the typical approaches to involving parents through PTA meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and open houses often unintentionally send the message that parents do not have a role in determining what's best for their children or how to improve schools. Our research suggests that this old approach is limited, but we are identifying “next practices”ⁱⁱ in equitable collaboration. These practices seek to develop knowledge, capacity and relationships to enable marginalized families to become fellow leaders in improving education alongside educators.



OVERVIEW:

Drawing on previous research and a comparative case study, this brief describes cultural brokers—individuals who acts as bridges between families and schools—and three promising strategies they used to engage families, especially those farthest from opportunities, in their children’s education: 1) parent capacity building; 2) culturally-specific relationship building; and 3) systemic capacity building. We offer recommendations for cultural brokering strategies that build more reciprocal, collective, and relational family-school collaboration.

1. We use the term “parents” broadly to include all types of biological and non-biological parents, families, and primary caregivers who support a child.



WHO ARE CULTURAL BROKERS?

Cultural brokers are individuals who act as bridges between schools and diverse families. According to the research,ⁱⁱⁱ these school staff, community-based personnel, or volunteers typically:

1. educate parents to support the school’s goals to improve student achievement;
2. connect parents to resources and information; and
3. advocate with parents and with school staff to promote change or decrease conflict.

Both our own and other research suggest that cultural brokers primarily work with parents to support the school’s agenda and

expectations. But how might cultural brokering work promote more equitable collaboration?

ROAD MAP CULTURAL BROKER ROLES

Through our case studies, we identified individuals whose formal positions involved working directly with parents and families as part of parent engagement efforts: Family Liaisons in Federal Way School District (FSD), Facilitators in Kent School District’s Parent Academy for Student Achievement (PASA) Program, and Family Allies in White Center. See the table below for a summary of their roles.

	FAMILY LIAISONS (FEDERAL WAY PUBLIC SCHOOLS)	PARENT FACILITATORS (KENT SCHOOL DISTRICT)	FAMILY ALLIES (WHITE CENTER CDA)
STRUCTURE	Full-time district staff, housed in elementary schools.	Temporary district employees only for Parent Academy.	Full and part-time CDA staff, housed in elementary schools.
ROLES	Worked with teachers and administrators to engage with parents Built a welcoming school climate Helped parents navigate the school system	Facilitated parent education programming in their native language Built relationships between parents with common language and shared experiences	Connected parents to school and community-based resources Immersed parents in dominant cultural and educational experiences through tailored activities

EMERGENT “NEXT PRACTICES” IN CULTURAL BROKER STRATEGIES

Within our study, the Family Liaisons, Parent Academy Facilitators, and Family Allies used a range of cultural brokering strategies that sought to: 1) develop parent knowledge and capacity to support student learning, 2) build relationships between families and between families and schools, and 3) catalyze systemic change to enable parents to influence schools.

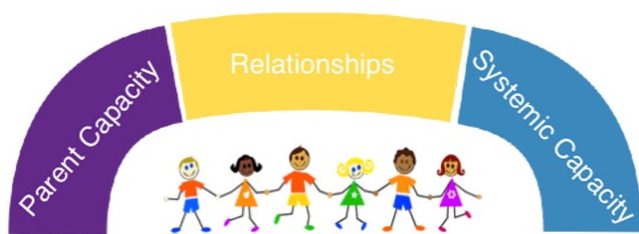
These strategies were often enacted in traditional ways, emphasizing:

- one-way communication (from school to parents);
- individualistic interactions with parents to improve their own child’s academic performance (rather than group interactions and the success of all students); and
- principals or district administrators as sole decision-makers.

However, we also saw cultural brokering that:

- built two-way, reciprocal communication between families and schools;
- used collective strategies to engage families together to support their own child as well as all the children in their community; and
- enabled parents to build relational power with each other to change school systems to better serve their children.

These reciprocal, collective, and relational strategies began to move beyond traditional “best practices” in the field, so we refer to them as *emergent next practices* in family engagement



1. PARENT/FAMILY CAPACITY BUILDING STRATEGIES

Cultural brokers in this study helped parents to build knowledge and skills for navigating schools to meet their children’s needs and support their learning. In many schools, communication on children’s learning flows in a single direction from the

school to parents, often by way of backpack flyers or robo-calls. More *reciprocal* strategies identify or build on family expertise and knowledge on their own children and communities to support student success. For example, cultural brokers were hired for their connections to the surrounding communities, and many were former or current parents within the school or existing community leaders from surrounding racial and ethnic communities. As a result, cultural brokers often used native language and cultural practices to provide support and programming to build parents’ knowledge and ability to access schools. They frequently drew on their own experiences and encouraged parents to learn from each other. Cultural brokers also helped improve existing parent engagement efforts, especially for bicultural families.

UNIDIRECTIONAL	RECIPROCAL
Telling or teaching parents how to support student improvement	Using parents’ personal knowledge and experience to support student improvement
Robocalls, letters in backpacks, newsletters	Sitting at the table to hear from parents directly

Reciprocal cultural brokering strategies involved building programs and supports driven by family needs, issues and priorities, rather than by educator assumptions about what parents should know and do. For instance, White Center Family Allies developed programming using family needs assessments and helped inform school improvement plans through community prioritization processes. The engagement workshops delivered by Federal Way Family Liaisons emerged from parent questions and concerns, and their district parent leadership team shaped the agenda for quarterly stakeholder meetings. Although the Kent Parent Academy originally used a pre-set curriculum, participants felt that having other parents from their community facilitate the lessons was key to the success of the program, and subsequently, district and school leaders, parents, teachers, and researchers co-designed a new set of lessons built from parent priorities for their own learning.²

2. Families in the Driver’s Seat: Parent-Driven Lessons and Guidelines for Collective Engagement <https://education.uw.edu/epsc/parent-curriculum>

2. CULTURALLY SPECIFIC RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING STRATEGIES

Whereas traditional approaches focus exclusively on interactions with individual parents about their own child (often once a problem has developed), cultural brokering in our study took the form of both *individual* and *collective* strategies to build relationships with parents and between parents and school staff. Staff created welcoming and inclusive environments to enable families to feel comfortable at the school interacting with each other and with school staff. For example, Family Liaisons regularly greeted parents one-on-one at school and worked to build trust and communicate care and concern through words, gestures, and invitations, in ways that were consistent with Latino cultural practices.

INDIVIDUAL	COLLECTIVE
Working one-on-one with parents	Working with all parents to advocate for the children within the school
Student- or staff-only spaces within the school	Creating family-dedicated spaces within the school

Cultural brokering also involved creating family-dedicated spaces within the school — sometimes in the form of actual physical rooms, other times in the form of parent-centered learning opportunities. For instance, in the Parent Academy, Facilitators in language-specific classrooms enabled parents to practice asking questions and advocating for their child, interactions that helped build relationships and identify shared concerns amongst parents of similar backgrounds. White Center Family Allies also worked within school and community settings to foster parent relationships and recruit families to community events that engaged them with other community members around issues such as affordable housing, transportation, drug use, and immigration. Within one Federal Way school, the Family Liaison office was expanded to create a family room for parents to gather and hang out during school hours. These welcoming and often language-specific spaces for families helped cultivate new relationships and networks between parents and connected them to the school.

3. SYSTEMIC CAPACITY BUILDING STRATEGIES

In a few cases, cultural brokering involved providing opportunities for parent voice and influence in school or district decision-making. In contrast to typical scenarios in which principals or district leaders alone make decisions (unilateral power), these strategies created avenues for parents to work together to influence change through their relationships and

UNILATERAL	RELATIONAL
School staff are the “experts” in student improvement	Parents drawing their collective expertise together to make change
School or district-based decisions on school improvement and parent programming	Family-based, family-led leadership and programming

shared concerns (relational power). In one instance, a cultural broker coached parents to write letters to school and district leaders to raise a shared concern about a learning space that did not meet the needs of students learning English or students with special needs. Another cultural brokering strategy enabled parents to represent themselves on leadership teams in their schools or district.

Systems leaders created opportunities for cultural brokers themselves to further develop as community leaders and teachers of other parents and educators. Within Kent’s Parent Academy, Facilitators often started out as recruiters or graduates of the program who wanted to take on more leadership. With support from district leaders, some of the Facilitators continued to grow their leadership, including joining school leadership teams, becoming district interpreters, becoming a para-educator in schools, and, in one case, even creating a parent-child native language class within a local housing community. Similarly, one White Center Family Ally became president of her school’s PTA and a key leader in her school’s transformation work. By creating opportunities for parents and families to participate in formal and informal leadership and decision-making, schools and community-based organizations can capitalize on families’ expertise on their own children and communities to create more sustainable and lasting family, school, and community partnerships for student success.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

OTHER PUBLICATIONS IN THE EPSC SERIES

- Data Inquiry for Equitable Collaboration: The Case of Neighborhood House’s Data Carousel
- Developing Common Parent Engagement Indicators (White Paper)
- Charting a Course to Equitable Collaboration: Learning from Parent Engagement Initiatives in the Road Map Project (Case Studies)

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→ <https://education.uw.edu/epsc/publications>

CULTURAL BROKERS Q&A

Q: WHERE DO I FIND CULTURAL BROKERS WITHIN MY COMMUNITY?

Cultural brokers might be school or district employees as well as existing family or community leaders. Find parents who are already working within the community formally or informally to connect families with each other and foster spaces and opportunities for families to work with educators in improving schools.

Q: HOW DO WE LEVERAGE CULTURAL BROKERS TO CREATE MORE EQUITABLE COLLABORATION?

Avoid approaching cultural brokering as translation or generic administrative support work. When cultural brokers have opportunities to coach teachers or administrators in engaging families and to participate in decision-making themselves, they can be integral in building more inclusive schools and supporting family participation and influence in organizational improvement.

Build from your strengths in the core work of the school or district. Identify how your organization can support the work

of cultural brokers to build family voice and influence within existing efforts or initiatives, such as school improvement planning processes or district equity initiatives.

Q: AS A CULTURAL BROKER, HOW MIGHT I PRIORITIZE MY WORK?

Don't just translate, communicate! Tensions between families and schools are not always due to language, but might reveal differences between community and school values. Cultural brokers can help identify issues, such as those related to culture or race, that may be at the root of tensions and help balance unequal power relations between families and educators in working towards solutions.

Everyone can engage in cultural brokering work and learn to advocate with (not for) families. As one cultural broker told us, "It's all about empowering the families." Rather than speaking for families, cultural brokering strategies can build family leadership, voice, and collective work to build productive relationships with educators and equitable learning for every student.

RESOURCES

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BRIEF BY DR. KATHRYN TORRES, NATHANIE LEE AND CHRISTINE TRAN

Equitable Parent-School Collaboration Project

PIs: Dr. Ann M. Ishimaru & Dr. Joe Lott
College of Education
University of Washington
<https://education.uw.edu/epsc>

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