

Bridging Multilingual Families and Schools: Cultural Brokering as Social Justice Leadership Practice

Journal of Family Diversity in
Education, 2022
Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 37-58



Kristine S. Lewis Grant

Drexel University

Vera J. Lee

Drexel University

Barbara Hoekje

Drexel University

Karena Escalante

Drexel University

Abstract

School districts across the United States employ cultural brokers to help facilitate the involvement of multilingual families in their children's schools. These liaisons build bridges over the cultural and language barriers that limit educational access and opportunities for multilingual families and their children. Despite the central role that cultural brokers play in fostering equitable and inclusive schools, their leadership may be unrecognized. In this qualitative case study, we examine the cultural brokering work performed by multilingual counseling assistants (MCAs) in two K-8 schools in a diverse urban school district in the northeastern United States. The primary data are face-to-face semi-structured interviews with three MCAs from the Burmese and Spanish-speaking school communities. We provide examples of how MCAs leverage the families' cultural capital in various dimensions of social justice leadership. This study demonstrates the role of MCAs as social justice leaders in making schools more equitable and inclusive communities. This study argues that leadership can be a distributed practice within schools not limited to formal school administration.

Keywords: multilingual families; family-school engagement; multilingual counseling assistants; cultural brokers; community cultural wealth; social justice leadership

Corresponding Author:

Kristine S. Lewis Grant, Clinical Professor, Drexel University, School of Education, 3401 Market Street, 3rd Floor, Philadelphia, PA, 19104

Email: ksl33@drexel.edu

“So I try for Spanish-speaking families to be proud about where they come from, to know that they are making a huge sacrifice for their kids coming here, not to feel embarrassed or ashamed about their own heritage. Sometimes in my own opinion, some parts of that heritage could be the key thing that this country and these communities need to get better.” - Carlos

This excerpt is from an interview with Carlos, a multilingual counseling assistant (MCA) for Spanish-speaking families at Spruce School, which has one of the largest populations of English language learners (ELLs) in an urban school district in the northeastern region of the United States. At the time of the study, Carlos was in his third year working as an MCA and was part of a large team of MCAs that works out of the district’s Family Engagement Office. Despite the important role that he plays in supporting multilingual students and families, he is employed on a contractual basis. Positions such as MCAs differ from other educators in that they are often not tenured or paid a salary (Theoharis & Toole, 2011). Despite being in a pivotal support role for student achievement, Carlos is never certain which school he will be assigned to for the subsequent academic year. The important work that MCAs do to support multilingual parents and their children is often overlooked.

The bridging work of cultural brokers like Carlos is especially important in helping culturally and linguistically diverse families acknowledge the value of community cultural wealth in their engagement with their children’s schools (Ishimaru, 2016; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). Our concept of “cultural brokering” is adapted from Jezewski’s (1990) work with healthcare workers, in which she defines it as “the act of bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change” (p. 497). We are conceptualizing the cultural brokering work of MCAs as that of “bridging” multicultural families with the broader school community in order to support them in actively engaging within the life and culture of the school. However, in previous scholarship, bridging has not been understood as an interactive leadership practice. We argue that bridging should be understood as a social justice leadership practice that supports family-school-community relationships, particularly in schools that do not involve multilingual parents as equal partners or share decision-making power with them.

Under Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the English proficiency accountability framework requires districts to support non-native English learners. By law, multilingual students must be provided equal access to educational opportunities. Every local education agency (LEA) is also required to provide communication to families who are not proficient in English in a language they understand (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). This includes engaging multilingual parents in school- and district-level groups and councils that influence policies and procedures within the district. In addition to this legislation, researchers have identified a need for schools to create learning environments that are responsive to students’ and families’ cultural and linguistic assets (Banse & Palacios, 2018; Moore, 1998; Yosso, 2005). While, in theory, the federal and state legislation should have created inclusive, welcoming spaces for multilingual families, prior research (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007; Valdes, 1996) has suggested that these families continue to be marginalized within K–12 schools and that current school systems, policies, and engagement efforts cater to white, middle-class, English-speaking families and traditional notions of what “involvement” from parents and families looks like.

In order to improve the educational experience of ELLs, North School District (pseudonym) hired MCAs to serve as a bridge between families and schools. In this qualitative case study, we examined the roles of multilingual counseling assistants (MCAs) in two urban public schools with large, diverse ethnic and linguistic communities. These MCAs had reputations for supporting ELLs and their parents. We explored how the MCAs engaged in relational and reciprocal practices (Ishimaru, 2016) to forge bridges between families, schools, and communities and leverage the community cultural wealth of the families. We examined these actions in light of social justice leadership (Furman,

2012) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). This paper explores the following research question: What work do MCAs do that connects the community cultural wealth (CCW) of families with their children's schools, and can it be described as social justice leadership?

Theoretical Framework

Our work draws upon key tenets and concepts of CCW (Yosso, 2005) and social justice leadership (Furman, 2012). Community cultural wealth is a significant theory that challenges traditional conceptualizations of cultural capital. Community cultural wealth decenters Western conceptions of cultural capital as representative of white middle- and upper-class families and promotes the wealth of capital possessed by communities of color instead (Yosso, 2005). Social justice leadership involves replacing unjust practices with “more equitable, culturally appropriate ones” (Furman, 2012, p. 194). The integration of these two frameworks helps to position MCAs as social justice leaders whose cultural brokering practices build bridges between multilingual families, schools, and communities. With a keen appreciation of multilingual families' CCW, MCAs can help to make schools welcoming and inclusive spaces for multilingual families and empower these families to fully participate in their children's schools.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso's (2005) development of the CCW framework originated from her critique of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital that evaluates a community's capital based upon their proximity and access to white middle- and upper-class knowledge and abilities. Furthermore, Bourdieu's ideas about cultural capital view communities of color through a deficit perspective in which they lack certain “social and cultural capital required for social mobility” (Bourdieu, 1977, as cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Instead, Yosso (2005) embraced tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) that recognize how race and racism intersect with various forms of oppression, for example, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on; acknowledge the diverse experiences of people of color; and reject a Black/white binary as the only way to discuss race. Specifically in the context of schools, Yosso (2005) argued that CRT critiques deficit views about students of color and their families that attribute students' academic performance to a lack of the knowledge and skills possessed by white students and assume that non-white caregivers lack support or interest in their children's education.

Yosso (2005) contends that culturally and linguistically diverse families do, in fact, possess multiple forms of capital, which she refers to as CCW. Community cultural wealth is “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). Yosso (2005) identified six “forms of capital [that] are not mutually exclusive or static, but rather are dynamic processes that build on one another as part of community cultural wealth” (p. 77). These forms of capital are as follows.

- Aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future even in the face of real and perceived barriers.
- Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language or style of communication.
- Familial capital is cultural knowledge, nurtured among *familia* (kin), that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition.
- Social capital refers to networks of people and community resources.
- Navigational capital is skill in maneuvering through social institutions.

- Resistant capital refers to the knowledge and skill fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality.

Yosso (2005) asserted that students and families of color possess these various forms of capital and carry them with them whenever they are in school. There, educators can learn about the CCW of their students, families, and communities and use it to inform teaching, policy, and practices in schools.

Social Justice Leadership

Central to social justice leadership is the critical examination of power relationships and replacement of marginalizing practices (e.g., Carpenter et al., 2017; DeMatthews, 2015; Theoharis, 2017). That is, social justice leadership requires that school leaders identify, interrogate, and eliminate inequities in educational policies and practices. Furman (2012) proposed a framework that conceptualizes leadership for social justice along Freire's concept of *praxis*, which is the integration of both *reflection* and *action*. Considering educational leadership as *praxis* allows for examination of the way educational leaders both *think about* and *act upon* issues that arise in their schools. This is the essential quality of social justice leadership. Furman (2012) identified a range of domains in which social justice leadership operates: "the interpersonal, to the communal, the systemic, and the ecological." The personal is at the center of the framework and extends out to the four other areas. The dimensions are also nested and interdependent, meaning that a leader must acquire knowledge and skills in one area before moving on to the next one (Furman, 2012, p. 204).

Furman's (2012) development of the five areas of the social justice leadership framework was informed by questions about the reflective and action-oriented nature of what school leaders do. The personal dimension refers to the ways in which school leaders demonstrate "deep, critical, and honest self-reflection" (p. 205). Practices rooted in the personal dimension demonstrate individual values and beliefs. The interpersonal dimension is characterized by leaders who "pro-actively build trusting relationships with colleagues, parents, and students in their schools" (p. 207). The communal dimension relates to leaders who "work to build community across cultural groups through inclusive, democratic practices" (p. 209), while the systemic dimension pertains to school leaders "assessing, critiquing and working to transform the system at the school and district levels, in the interest of social justice and learning for all children" (p. 210). Finally, the ecological dimension relates to school leaders recognizing how social justice issues in a school are "situated within broader sociopolitical, economic, and environmental contexts" (p. 211). Praxis – reflection and action – are instantiated across each of the dimensions.

Integrated Theoretical Framework

Integrating CCW and social justice leadership provides a more nuanced consideration of the work of MCAs. Multilingual counseling assistants are not traditionally seen as school leaders. Further, marginalized communities have not been viewed as possessing cultural capital. These two perspectives ~~points~~ together allow us to highlight the work of MCAs as leaders within the school community on behalf of multilingual families. Their work involves interpersonal relationships and community-based activities and address systemic and ecological-level inequities. The social justice leadership framework makes these practices visible. The work of MCAs with marginalized communities allows the capital of multilingual families to become recognizable within the school community.

The work of MCAs has been referred to as cultural brokering. Using both frameworks enable us to understand the purpose and advocacy of MCAs and to see their work as not just assimilating multilingual families into schools. We challenge the traditional view of cultural brokers to reveal the leadership required to effectively advocate for and include multilingual families as valuable members of their children's school communities. Through social justice leadership practices as described in

Furman's (2012) framework, MCAs in this study leveraged multilingual families' CCW in ways that expanded the traditional practices of schools.

Literature Review

The framework and discussion that follow are grounded in three interconnected bodies of literature: (a) the school engagement of multilingual families, (b) the important role of cultural brokers, and (c) how social justice leaders work in schools. These bodies of literature provide an important backdrop to the complex relationship between multilingual families and school engagement, the role and importance of cultural brokering, and school leaders who approach their work through stances of social justice.

Engaging Multilingual Families

Over the past several decades, scholars have explored factors relating to parental involvement. Exemplary practices for teachers engaging the families of multilingual learners require multiple pathways for communication and family engagement. Researchers have long critiqued current initiatives around parent involvement as supporting the normative practices of white middle-class families (Lee et al., 2020; Greene, 2013; Johnson, 2015; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). Greene (2013) contended that traditional definitions of parent involvement have focused on children's academic achievement and that any parent who departs from this is viewed through a deficit lens. Epstein's (1995) framework described six types of parent involvement and somewhat broadened the notion of what engagement looks like, for example, including parents in school decisions, but it fails to acknowledge caregivers' "orientations to the world [that] include the multiple spaces of their lived experiences" (Greene, 2013, p. 4).

Johnson (2015) identified three bodies of literature on parent involvement: positivistic, ecological, and critical. Positivistic literature views parent involvement through the lens of western ideologies and views that are monocultural and static. Ecological literature focuses on how parents work with schools, but this literature does not include racial or cultural perspectives. Epstein's model has been cited as an example of an ecological model of parent involvement. Critical literature recognizes how current systems and structures have marginalized culturally and linguistically diverse caregivers and focuses on the "voices and experiences of parents and students of color" (p. 85). Gaitan (2012) included the community as an important part of a culturally responsive approach to connecting families, schools, and communities together because the community is where parents often find their social and cultural networks.

Research about parent involvement models and strategies in schools have often elicited troubling findings about how caregivers are perceived and treated that reinforce a monocultural belief about how families should be engaged with schools. Christianikis (2011) interviewed 15 elementary teachers of diverse cultural and racial backgrounds and revealed that these educators subscribed to a model of involvement that viewed parents as "helpers." The teachers did not have access to resources such as classroom assistants and invited parents to function as helpers by, for example, organizing materials for the teacher. The researcher argued that when parents were viewed as "the help," they were not treated as equal partners at this school (p. 164).

Ishimaru and colleagues' (2016) research on cultural brokers working with multilingual parents across three schools found that the cultural brokers' efforts to engage caregivers often "socializ[ed] non-dominant families into school-centric norms, expectations, and agendas" (p. 864). We discuss the complicated and, at times, contradictory roles of cultural brokers in the next section, but the researchers' study revealed that initiatives supported by the schools were often created without the

input of parents and that the implicit assumptions behind some of the programs, for example, offering a workshop on the topic of behaviors that promote students' success in school, revealed deficit beliefs about the parents. Ishimaru et al. (2016) argued that what was absent in these initiatives were more "collective, reciprocal" (p. 865) ways of working with students' families.

Ladky and Peterson's (2008) research on school practices to engage immigrant parents provided another example of how well-intended but uncritical approaches to parent involvement can result in reinforcing dominant perspectives about how caregivers should be involved in schools. The researchers reported the practices that were supported by the school-parent partnership program, for example, having recently arrived immigrant parents work with their children on homework and providing informal or formal assistance in the classroom. In short, while previous research on family engagement in education has mentioned the importance of raising cultural awareness of parents' cultural backgrounds to school teachers and staff, tangible steps on how schools can achieve this cultural sensitivity have remained unclear (Ladky & Peterson, 2008).

Other studies have shown promising directions for parent involvement strategies and models that focus less on school-based expectations of involvement and instead center the social and cultural capital of caregivers. Karsli-Calamak et al. (2021) conducted a study of 14 teachers in Turkey working with refugee children and families in family math night sessions. Over the course of these sessions, the teachers developed meaningful relationships with the families and were able to identify different forms of the families' CCW. The teachers' initial impressions of the refugee families were transformed as a result of these relationships, and the teachers developed an appreciation for the families' histories and familial assets. Moreover, in Auerbach's (2007) research of 16 African American and Latino parents, she constructed an alternative typology of how these caregivers viewed their roles in their children's educations. Auerbach (2007) noted categories of involvement that often drew upon the socio-cultural capital of the parents. For instance, in the category of "moral supporters," the Latino parents' role was based upon the notions of "*educacion*" and "*consejos*," which Auerbach (2007) defined as "cultural narrative advice and teachings" (p. 263). Another category, "ambivalent companions," reflected parents who emotionally supported their children, for example, protecting and encouraging them even if they were not always on board with their children's postsecondary plans.

Research on parent engagement remains unclear in terms of what impact, if any, parent engagement has on family-school relationships. Critique of the historical conceptualization of parent engagement is reimaged in the context of this study and expanded to include the diverse and equitable strategies of MCAs to advocate for socially just relationships with families in an urban educational setting. Moreover, caregivers are involved in their children's educations in ways that are not always legitimized by schools. It is important to recognize the range of ways in which parents are engaged. In the current study, the MCAs recognized and leveraged the CCW of multilingual parents in roles that went beyond just academic or language support and helped to form relationships between members of the school community and parents.

The Roles of Cultural Brokers in Educational Settings

The concept of cultural brokering is described in Jezewski's (1990) research on the work of healthcare professionals who helped migrant workers gain access to healthcare services. She called these professionals "cultural brokers" and described their roles as "bridging, linking, or mediating between groups" (p. 497). In the context of education, cultural brokers navigate two worlds: the formalized organization of education and the informal connections between multicultural communities. Within educational systems and structures, the role of cultural brokering is taken on by different individuals such as teachers, instructional aides, school counselors, school or parent liaisons, community members, students and siblings, or individuals who are specifically hired for the work of cultural brokering, such as bilingual counseling assistants (Ishimaru, 2016; Jezewski, 1990;

Yohani, 2013). Cultural brokers, such as family liaisons who work with culturally and linguistically diverse families in particular, help to navigate parent and school relationships (Ishimaru, 2016).

Coady (2019) defined cultural brokers as cultural informants who possess the language skills and social capital necessary to serve as mediators between educational institutions and local families. Previous educational advocates have suggested brokering and building trust as tools for enhancing family engagement in schools (WIDA, 2017). However, multilingual children should not serve as cultural brokers as this can become a potential stressor for students (Orellana, 2009; Coady, 2019). The bridging work of cultural brokers is especially important in acknowledging the value of CCW in the engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families with their children's schools (Ishimaru, 2016; Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). Cultural brokers assume different roles when they work with multilingual families. Those roles can range from translating and interpreting mainstream educational systems to advocacy work with school administrators and teachers on behalf of families (Singh et al., 1999; Yohani, 2013). Cultural brokers mediate and counter longstanding deficit views of multilingual families by building upon the CCW that multilingual families possess, which is often overlooked because it does not resemble the valued forms of cultural capital associated with white middle-class families (Yosso, 2005). While scholars share differing views about whether it is important for cultural brokers to share the same cultural backgrounds as the families they serve (Lewis, 2004; Singh et al., 1999; Yohani, 2013), the bridging work of cultural brokers is vital to supporting a school's relationships with multilingual families.

Research on cultural brokers has shown a complex picture of the roles these individuals play in schools. In Ishimaru et al.'s (2016) study of 15 cultural brokers who worked across three school districts, the researchers found that the majority of the family liaisons utilized strategies that "socialize[d] non-dominant families into school-centric norms" (p. 864). The approaches that the cultural brokers used were characterized as "unidirectional" and "unilateral." They viewed school educators as the sole possessors of knowledge and encouraged parents to adhere to their behaviors and norms (p. 866). The researchers also found a few cultural brokers who worked more equitably with families. Their approach to brokering involved creating a welcoming environment for parents, building connections, and broadening parent engagement to connect families and communities together.

Moreover, in Martinez-Cosio and Iannacone's (2007) study of parent liaisons, the researchers described the challenging position that these liaisons often found themselves in as cultural brokers as they mediated tensions between parents and school staff, parents and school administrators, and parents and the school district. Inherently, the role of cultural brokers is that of institutional agents. While parent liaisons are able to use their unique positions to change institutional norms and systems, they are also part of the system that reinforces dominant cultural norms and practices in their work with caregivers (p. 365).

Finally, Yohani's (2013) case study of eight cultural brokers who worked with refugee families and children in Canada highlighted the important services brokers provided in terms of bridging students with educational activities and connecting families to mental health resources. While Yohani (2013) agreed that there are challenges with cultural brokering in schools, she recommended clarifying the roles and expectations of these workers within school systems and recognizing that their roles will change in order to respond to the evolving needs of families.

This collection of studies positions cultural brokering as central to the work of MCAs. Multilingual counseling assistants are institutional agents and, as such, represent the schools and districts that employ them (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007). Their primary charge is to translate and interpret for the multilingual families they serve in order to establish relationships between schools and the families. Multilingual counseling assistants often share the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the families they serve, contributing to their deep understandings of the language and culture of

multilingual families. This insider-insider status that MCAs occupy enables them to perform this role as cultural brokers. However, with this role comes important questions about their responsibilities, expectations, and power. Taken together, studies of liaison roles like MCAs paint a complex picture of the relationships and contexts that MCAs negotiate.

The Work of Social Justice Leaders in Schools

While a number of studies have examined the role of school leaders and family-school partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse families (Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Vera et al., 2012; Wassell et al., 2017), only a few studies have explored the work of school leaders through the lens of social justice leadership (DeMatthews et al., 2016). In a majority of these studies, leadership is narrowly defined, and the participants are typically school administrators or hold other high-level leadership positions. In this section, we highlight several studies that used social justice leadership as an explicit lens through which to analyze how leaders enacted changes to existing school structures and systems and improved the ways they partnered with parents to support their children.

Theoharis and O'Toole (2011) conducted a cross-case analysis to examine how school leaders across three schools were able to create asset-based, inclusive services for ELLs and their families. They placed emphasis on understanding the beliefs, knowledge, and skills of the school leaders. The researchers found several commonalities across ESL reform efforts at these sites, including ensuring that ELLs received ESL services within their general education classes, making it a requirement for all general education teachers to include ELLs in their planning and curriculum, and offering school-wide professional development for teachers to create more inclusive classrooms for ELLs and engage families by improving systems of communication. Unlike the other studies reviewed in this section, the researchers did not focus exclusively on parent engagement reform and practices across these schools. The focus seemed to be primarily on the ELLs and improving the ways that schools were meeting their academic and social needs.

Auerbach (2009) drew upon qualitative data from two different studies that explored how 35 school administrators conceptualized school partnerships. She found that the administrators' leadership around these efforts fell along a continuum for supporting partnership work. The first type of leadership model was characterized as "Leadership Preventing Partnership," in which the administrators maintained a separation between their schools and the community and parents and there was no partnership orientation with parents (Auerbach, 2009, p. 749). The second type of leadership model was "Leadership for Nominal Partnerships." Here, the goal of partnership with parents was to increase achievement, and there was a one-way service-oriented relationship with parents (Auerbach, 2009, p. 749). The third type of leadership model was described as "Leadership for Traditional Partnerships." This was similar to the second model in terms of the partnership orientation, but the goals of the partnership also include improving communication with parents (Auerbach, 2009, p. 749). The fourth leadership model was described as "Leadership for Authentic Partnerships." The partnership goals had a strong orientation toward "social justice, parent advocacy, and dialogue" (Auerbach, 2009, p. 749). Auerbach (2009) argued that the first three types of leadership models hinder genuine collaboration between schools and parents and are typically deficit-oriented in how they view caregivers. However, in the "Authentic Partnerships" model, school leaders welcome equal partnership and collaboration with parents and clearly view parents through an asset-based lens.

DeMatthews and colleagues (2016) conducted an in-depth qualitative case study of one leader's enactment of social justice leadership in a private nondenominational Christian elementary school located in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. In this case, the participant, Ms. Donna, was one of the founding members of the school and helped to establish its mission. The findings from the study presented four important leadership practices that were enacted by Ms. Donna. First, Ms. Donna sought to learn about the "lived experiences of marginalized communities," and variables that

impacted the students' well-being (p. 784). Second, Ms. Donna found a way to address students' academic achievement while also addressing climate and cultural issues in the school, for example, the social and emotional needs of children and families. Third, Ms. Donna recognized that student success requires schools to work in solidarity with parents. Lastly, Ms. Donna recognized the importance of drawing upon the CCW of families in her vision of school partnership work with parents. The researchers also reported that Ms. Donna was constantly reflective about whether the school was meeting the expectations of the parent partnership work and sought to make long-term improvements in areas where it fell short of those expectations.

Brooks and colleagues (2007) expanded our understanding of social justice leadership as distributed leadership across a school rather than just formal leadership roles. They combined distributed leadership and social justice leadership frameworks by examining the practices of distributed leadership for social justice. In their study of an urban high school (Brooks et al., 2007), the researchers observed leaders throughout the school engaging in social justice leadership practices, including “bridge work,” to connect students on an individual or group level to external sources “intended to help them overcome various forms of inequity” (p. 396). They conducted interviews with 42 administrators and teachers. The researchers found a range of ways in which leadership was distributed at the school. For instance, teachers and administrators were involved in various departmental- or grade-level task forces to address student retention rates at the school. They “initiated and engaged in countless impromptu exchanges about how to reach students with innovative teaching strategies” and helped students see how school was relevant to their lives (p. 391). The researchers also reported that there were occasions where teachers, administrators, and students approached leadership to raise concerns about instructional practices that did not serve all students equitably. The researchers noted that school leaders engaged in important “bridge work,” meaning they connected individual students and groups to external resources and services. Brooks and colleagues' (2007) study revealed a much more nuanced view of leadership that is not only relegated to individuals with formal titles and roles in schools. Given the nature of how leadership can occur in organic ways and is often distributed across individuals, an organizational view of how leadership practices are performed affords a more comprehensive view of how social justice leadership is enacted.

Insights from these studies indicated that social justice leaders possess certain dispositions, qualities, and skills in their engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse families and students. These leaders “view language as a right, ... and work to provide [students and families] equal access to educational opportunities” (Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011, p. 650). DeMatthews and colleagues (2016), after reflecting on the focal leader in their study, highlighted these practices as “a commitment to promoting socially just family engagement through school-community partnerships that draws upon cultural community wealth and prioritizes the needs of students, families, and communities” (p. 784). Lastly, Brooks and colleagues (2007) viewed social justice leadership as a “distributed leadership” effort among multiple individuals that affords a broader view of leadership practices and leads to transformational changes in a school setting. Our study contributes to the work on multilingual family engagement by showing how MCAs enact cultural brokering as a social justice practice that leverages multilingual families' CCW.

Methods

This paper is drawn from a larger qualitative case study of family engagement in two urban district schools during the 2019–2020 school year. We used an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 2009) in which we purposefully sampled participants at each school to investigate the research question: What work do MCAs do that connects the CCW of families with schools, and can it be

described as social justice leadership? A case study design allowed for an exploration of the participants’ social constructions of meaning and reality (Schwandt, 1994).

The research was conducted in two K–8 schools in a large urban school district in the northeastern United States. In a school district of over 15,000 students, approximately 12% were ELLs. Spruce and Walnut Elementary Schools were selected based on recommendations from administrators in the district’s central office dedicated to family engagement and multilingual programming. During the 2018–2019 academic year, the ELL population accounted for approximately 22% of Spruce and 43% of Walnut.

For the purpose of this paper, we focused on three MCAs who served designated linguistic populations in these two district schools. Carlos was an MCA for Spanish-speaking families at Spruce. Ezra was an MCA for the Spanish-speaking families at Walnut School. Evangeline was an MCA for Burmese families at Spruce School. Table 1 provides information about each participant.

Table 1: MCA Participant Chart

<i>Name</i>	<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Tenure as MCA at School Site</i>
<i>Carlos</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>3 years</i>
<i>Ezra</i>	<i>Puerto Rico</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>Less than a year</i>
<i>Evangeline</i>	<i>Myanmar (Burma)</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Burmese</i>	<i>More than 5 years</i>

According to the school district website, the main responsibilities of the MCAs included interpretation work, helping families with language barriers, building relationships, and helping multilingual families feel more engaged and comfortable at their schools. Their roles were not limited to language translation for schools and multilingual parents.

Data Sources

We interviewed multiple members of the school communities to gain a full understanding of the relationships between multilingual families, teachers, administrators, and community members. As a result of these interviews, we began to understand the centrality of the MCA role.

The primary data source for this paper was face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the three MCAs from Spruce and Walnut Schools. The interview protocol consisted of 11 questions that addressed topics such as communication strategies with multilingual parents, resources provided to parents by the schools, parent involvement in decision-making, and school engagement with the community to support families. The following are examples of questions asked.

1. How would you characterize your approach to being an MCA?
2. What strategies do you use to communicate with the parents/guardians of ELL students in the schools where you work?
3. How has your school and school staff tried to better understand the background, culture, and goals that ELL families have for their children?

Each interview was conducted by members of the research team and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by a transcription service and reviewed for accuracy by the researchers. Questions were developed in advance and approved by the university’s IRB office.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding (Braun & Clark, 2005). The researchers developed a codebook comprised of concepts in the CCW and social justice leadership frameworks. Data were coded for each of the six forms of CCW and five dimensions of social justice leadership. The researchers coded one transcript together to ensure consistency across our individual understandings and applications of the codes. We then revised the codebook to include agreed-upon examples of each code and used this in our subsequent coding.

We coded further interviews independently and then reviewed and discussed our coding to resolve any unclear aspects. During these discussions, the researchers identified patterns where the codes overlapped and co-occurred within the data. These patterns were then further analyzed and inspired the development of the integrated framework to help explain the work of the MCAs.

Findings

In this section, we first describe each MCA's background and key aspects of their work. We introduce the types of cultural brokering practices that the MCAs enacted. We present these practices in relation to the various dimensions of social justice leadership (personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological). At the same time, we examine how these practices helped the MCAs leverage the CCW (familial, aspirational, linguistic, social, navigational, and resistance) of the multilingual families. This analytic approach allowed us to explore the data in terms of our integrated framework. Our findings show variation in the types of social justice dimensions and forms of CCW employed by each MCA. We consider the meaning of this in more detail in the discussion section of this paper.

Ezra

Ezra had been an MCA for Spanish-speaking families for the past two years. At the time of the study, he was in his first year as an MCA at Walnut Elementary School and another nearby school.

Ezra was bilingual. His first language was Spanish. He learned English after he arrived in the United States from Puerto Rico. He explained how his background with his own family informed how he supported the Spanish-speaking families in his school: "I remember that my grandparents said, "Hey, look, we didn't come here to waste our time. We want to give you a good future, and we need you to learn English but not forget Spanish." Ezra's family impressed the significance of language upon him. They valued Spanish.

Yet, in order for Ezra to take full advantage of the opportunities and possibilities of the United States, he needed to learn English. Ezra continued:

I valued the sacrifice they made, so I learned English as quickly as I could, as best as I could. Then I was the one interpreting for them at doctor's appointments and – when they had to go on certain events or to the city or whatever, you know. So, that was ingrained in me, the importance of knowing how to do things the way things are done here [in the US], that we were not back in Puerto Rico, where Spanish was our first language. And we knew how to navigate there, but here, it's important.

Ezra witnessed the sacrifices that his family made in order to emigrate to the US. However, his family's language and culture were not to be lost but practiced, sustained, and cherished. His family valued and protected their linguistic capital. Ezra needed to learn English, but he drew upon his family's navigational capital in order to translate during appointments with the doctor, the city government, and other events. Ezra reflected, "I remember – I've never forgotten – how difficult it was for them to communicate in those first three years we were here. And it's something that is deeply ingrained, so I know how difficult it is, the culture shock." Ezra's personal experiences shaped his leadership.

Remembering his family's experiences, he could imagine the challenges confronting Spanish-speaking ELLs and their families.

Ezra leveraged the linguistic, aspirational, and navigational capital of the Spanish-speaking families that he served. He understood that preserving Spanish and becoming bilingual in English expands and enhances the families' linguistic capital. Moreover, Ezra recognizes the wealth of aspirational and navigational capital that families already possess, as demonstrated in their relocation to the US. Ezra sought to leverage these forms of CCW by helping families to understand the educational system in the US and the schools that their children attended.

When asked to explain his role as an MCA, Ezra outlined his duties to provide "interpretation, translation, and parent workshops for the district." He later elaborated, "We [MCAs] are their [multilingual families'] brokers. We're the ones who are in a meeting, we're interpreting. Documents, we're translating, but we're also advocating for them."

In his role as an MCA, Ezra exhibited the interpersonal dimension of social justice leadership. When Ezra was hired as an MCA for Walnut Elementary, he endeavored to get to know the families. During the weeks before the start of the academic year, Ezra went into the neighborhood to introduce himself to parents and families. He frequented churches, restaurants, laundromats, and community events. He explained his approach to meeting families at church:

I knew where they congregated for their faith base. I went to their churches, and I said, "I'm [Ezra]. I understand that many families, their children go to [Walnut]. ... May I have a minute to say who I am and what my role is and where I'll be?"

Ezra took the time to learn about the families. He learned about the specific regions of Mexico and South America from which the families originated. He learned about their journeys to the US and their hopes and dreams for their children. Ezra laid a foundation for building relationships with families during the school year:

So, it kinda gave me a really nice segue. When school started, even if they didn't know me, they had heard of me from either one of the community events or church events, or they remembered me, saying "Hey, look, I'm gonna be there to support." And so, I had tons of parents. When we came in September, we had a relationship already.

Ezra expressed that "[it] was important to really immerse myself in the community," and he was intentional about "going to where I know they [Spanish-speaking families] felt comfortable."

Operating from the interpersonal dimension of social justice leadership, Ezra accessed the families' social capital. As a result of meeting families in their communities during the summer months, Ezra developed an understanding of the families' familial, aspirational, and linguistic capital, and he leveraged their CCW to open doors for them within the school.

In addition to working with interpersonally with individual families, Ezra also sought to build bridges between families and the school. During the school year, Ezra offered a monthly parent workshop series that introduced the resources available in the school, and he explained educational terms and school policies and procedures. Ezra described some of the topics discussed:

We started off the first one really talking overall "what is in your child's school?" Principal Sanchez [gave] an overall presentation of what to expect this school year. Different grade teachers explained, "This is what we'll be doing in math. This is what we'll be doing in reading. This is what we'll be doing in science. When you see this come home, this is what to expect." We had the special ed unit come out to the parents and say, "Hey, this is what special education is. This is what being an English language learner is." Just giving them those tools to know what is it that their kids are exposed to, what is the building resource we have. ... So, we're keeping them informed. That information piece is very – it's crucial – for building that bridge.

In this instance, Ezra displayed the communal dimension of social justice leadership. With knowledge of the way schools work, parents can become more active in their children's educations and school

communities. He explained the school and educational system in a way that could activate families' aspirational, navigational, and social capital.

Ezra also interpreted the monthly Home-School Association meetings. Ezra negotiated a relationship with the president of the Home-School Association. Before each meeting, Ezra met with the president to review the agenda. When Ezra was available, he would sit with the Spanish-speaking families and interpret the meeting for them. On the occasions when he was unable to attend, he would call the Spanish-speaking families whose names appeared on the sign-in sheet to follow up, review the agenda, and answer questions. Ezra also offered a recap of important information from the Home-School Association meetings during his monthly workshop. Ezra noted that the president and other families in the Home-School Association, largely comprised of white and African American mothers, “express[ed] appreciation that the [Spanish-speaking] families [were] coming [to the meetings]”:

I love the fact the Home and School community is saying, “Thank you for coming,” and the [Spanish-speaking] parents were like, “Wow, they said thank you for coming?” Yes. This has always been available to you. It’s just been a perception. They’ve always wanted you here. They want you to be part of conversation. They want you to suggest. They want you to participate. They want you to be active.

By interpreting the Home-School Association meetings, Ezra opened the door for English- and Spanish-speaking families to discuss common issues and shared concerns as parents of children at Walnut Elementary School. As a social justice leader, Ezra made systemic changes to the way that the Home-School Association meetings operated and created new expectations around participation for all parents at the school. He worked to create inclusive contexts where families could meet to discuss school issues and events across languages.

In addition to breaking down barriers to meetings, Ezra also demonstrated the communal dimension of social justice leadership by making volunteer opportunities available to parents. In order to volunteer, parents at Walnut Elementary were required to undergo a background check and fingerprinting process. This posed a barrier to Spanish-speaking families' engagement in their children's school. Ezra addressed parents' fears that completing the paperwork would put them and their families in jeopardy. He was able to successfully facilitate the volunteer clearance process for the families.

On Martin Luther King Day, a group of Spanish-speaking fathers built a new garden for the school, painted, and made other minor repairs. Ezra attributed the involvement and contributions to the strength of the family-school relationships. He recounted:

And the dads called me and thanked me – “Why? We're thanking you! You took your Monday off to help us!” But, they said, “Thank you for allowing us to participate.” And they told the principal, “Anything you need. Our schedules are crazy, but anything you need.” This is what we're talking about. Community. We build relationships beyond the people, and they – everyone has a role, a menu of ways of participating.

This is another example of Ezra's leadership at the systemic level. He demystified the volunteer clearance process and created paths of access for Spanish-speaking parents' involvement in their children's school.

In conclusion, in Ezra's work as an MCA, we see social justice leadership enacted in a nested continuum across the personal, interpersonal, communal, and systemic dimensions. Ezra brokered relationships between the school and Spanish-speaking families. He utilized his cultural brokering practices to help Spanish-speaking families access educational opportunities, participate in school meetings and events, and create an equitable, inclusive climate in the school. He recognized the CCW of the Spanish-speaking families and leveraged the familial, aspirational, navigational, and social capital of the families to facilitate their full participation in the school community.

Carlos

Carlos was originally from Spain and had worked as an MCA at Spruce School for three years serving Spanish-speaking families. According to Carlos, about 47% of the students spoke Spanish, and the majority of them were from Central America. He worked at the school five days a week.

Carlos' personal approach to his role as an MCA stemmed from his former work as a community organizer. He believed that the experiences, knowledge, and resources that immigrant families bring to the US make it a better country. He wants students to feel "proud of where they came from" and not ashamed of their heritage. He wants to ease families' transitions to living in the States by acknowledging the assets that they bring to the country: "I understand that when people come here, this is a new opportunity in their lives, but I want to acknowledge the experience that people bring."

He recognizes the familial, aspirational, and navigational capital that the families already possess as valuable resources for the school community. Carlos explains, "I'm a cultural broker, so I try to work with the school staff to try for them to understand the reality of Spanish-speaking families" – particularly the challenges they experience when they first arrive in the US.

Carlos' work was very much situated within the interpersonal dimension. He characterized his main responsibilities as working with school staff to better understand the needs of multilingual families. These responsibilities included helping families navigate the school and city systems, translating for families and the school, creating connections between families, and working with ELLs who often arrive from their home countries with trauma-related experiences.

Carlos stands outside of the school every morning to greet students and talk to their parents. After getting to know him, parents approached him with personal questions about school policies and processes that they did not understand, for example, the school calling a caregiver about a student's absence. A parent may also ask Carlos about non-school-related questions like finding a dentist or healthcare. Carlos described the way he connected with families in the following way: "I also put a lot of interest in building community among the families who come, because it's frequent the families come here and they feel alone; they don't have many friends." He leveraged the social and linguistic capital of the families by helping them create connections within the larger school community where they could meet each other and find a network of support and relationships among other Spanish-speaking parents in both formal (school-sponsored) and non-formal contexts. In addition, Carlos' work at the interpersonal level supported individual parents' navigational and social capital as they learned about services, resources, and structures to support their children and families within their communities.

Carlos hosted meetings for the Spanish-speaking families where he could address their questions and help them understand school routines and practices, for example, standardized tests, report cards, and so on. He explained school policies and practices to help the parents navigate a complex school district:

So I try to have a workshop with families to explain what the [annual standardized test] is. When you get in a school, there's a lingo that you start using, and sometimes teachers talk to families, like yeah next week is [the test]. And people don't know what [the test] is but they are embarrassed to ask.

More than just translating English and Spanish, Carlos deciphered and explained educational terms and acronyms to parents in a comfortable environment. He also shared tips with the parents to help their children feel less anxious and more prepared to take the annual standardized tests.

As a Spanish speaker, Carlos helped the families feel comfortable expressing their concerns within the school space and supported the caregivers' navigational capital as they maneuvered through important school and district academic events. Carlos shared that the parents trust him: "It's not only about school, people want to talk to me, not because they want to know about me, but they feel

comfortable having this kind of role, liaison in the school.” The parents not only sought out Carlos’ advice – they also built relationships with one another in the workshops and other events that he hosted.

In one instance, Carlos described the Latin American school calendar to the teachers and counselors and explained that some of the families registered their children for school during the winter months. The teachers did not understand why they were seeing a pattern of families moving into the community later in the school year. Carlos told them that “in Guatemala and Honduras ... school usually is from January to October, so some people choose the fall to travel.” The school calendar is different in those countries compared to the US, and this was the reason why the school saw an increase in student registrations during the winter. He shared this information with the teachers to dispel any false assumptions they might have about the families’ reasons for registering their children later in the school year. In this way, Carlos emphasized the aspirational capital of the parents to the school staff to help them understand how the actions of the families demonstrated the hopes they possessed for their children in moving them to the US so they could receive better educational opportunities.

Carlos’ actions within the ecological dimension of Furman’s (2012) framework were particularly pronounced during the interview. He actively sought to help parents who experience societal challenges outside of the school. One critical issue that some of the parents approached him about related to their immigration status. The school frequently received families who were undocumented. While they were welcomed at Spruce, parents still worried about how their status would impact their lives. Carlos shared a story about an undocumented mother who was arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE):

There was a family here whose mom was taken by ICE, and she was in detention for two months and a half ... the dad came to talk to me, and I helped build like a community response for the family to support the kids, because there were two kids here coming to school in PreK and kindergarten, and of course, they were super traumatized by this, and to get some money for the family, because Dad needed to stop working for a few weeks for – somebody needed to take care of the [children], because [the mother] was not able to go to work.

Carlos took action when the mother was arrested and rallied support for the family in connecting them to community members who offered the family support while their mother/wife was detained by ICE. He leveraged the social and resistance capital of the community to advocate on behalf of the mother. As a result of Carlos’ involvement and advocacy for the family, other undocumented parents at the school trusted him enough to talk about their own immigration situations and sought his advice about issues they encountered with ICE or with people in the community.

Carlos also worked as a mediator across different ethnic and racial lines, responding to issues arising from the larger sociopolitical context. While Carlos worked mainly with Spanish-speaking families, there were instances when cross-cultural tensions arose at Spruce that involved students and parents from different racial or ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Carlos witnessed situations where he needed to intervene when students or parents said derogatory or disparaging comments about students from other backgrounds:

So there is a lot of tension – I wouldn’t say a lot, but there is some tension – and a lot of the fights are between Spanish-speaking kids and African American kids. And that can, a lot of times start a lot of racist comments coming from Latino families, “Well, you know, African American kids, they are this way, or they will do that.” And I always try, that’s something that I try to [handle] with the Spanish-speaking families.

Carlos encouraged the multilingual parents to develop resistance capital in accepting cultural and linguistic differences between the African American and Spanish-speaking communities. Carlos extended his role as an MCA into the ecological dimension of social justice leadership to dismantle

prejudicial attitudes and behaviors between these two communities, and he commented on similar biases that he observed between different Spanish-speaking families as well. For instance, he offered an example of a student who was in conflict with another classmate from a different country. The student said, “Oh, but you know, they are from Honduras, like they’re very dangerous.” By dismantling these stereotypes, his work bridged racial, ethnic, and cultural differences among various sectors of the larger school community.

In sum, Carlos’ work as an MCA revealed social justice leadership enacted in a nested continuum across the personal, interpersonal, communal, and ecological dimensions. His work leveraged the familial, aspirational, navigational, and social capital of the families in his community.

Evangeline

Evangeline had been an MCA for the local Burmese community for six years and worked at Spruce Elementary School four days a week. She also worked part-time with the state Migrant Education Program, making visits to support student education at home. The Burmese immigrant community in this large northeastern city was diverse, with multiple ethnic groups and languages.

Evangeline was Burmese. Her first language was Tedim Chin, and she learned Burmese as a child when her family moved to the country’s capital – one of several moves before coming to the US. Her reasons for working as an MCA were deeply rooted in her own experience of immigration as well as her religious and family values of helping others:

I myself experienced the hardship becoming, like, not able to speak the native language. When I was about fourth grade, my family had to move to the capital city of my country. Over there, they only speak our common language, which we call Burmese. But Burmese is not my native language – and I speak Tedim Chin – so I really can’t forget about how it is really hard to be in the school and not speak the language.

Evangeline also emphasized her orientation toward serving and helping others, as shaped both by her beliefs as a Christian and her mother’s example:

I believe that God give me a chance, an opportunity, to show His love and care to other people through me. So that is one of the reasons that I really love being an MCA ... And because of my mom, and she used to tell me that if you can help someone else, don’t say no. Just help them – and never forget where we come from. So, you know, whenever you can give a hand, give a hand to other people.

In her work as an MCA, these values and experiences served as the foundation for Evangeline’s cultural brokering practices in recognizing and leveraging the CCW of her community.

Language interpretation and translation were key aspects of Evangeline’s work. She interpreted in parent workshops, parent meetings, report card conferences, and other events, such as Back to School Nights or other school- and district-wide events. In addition, she translated documents such as monthly calendars or event flyers that are distributed to parents.

Her work was facilitated by trust and relationships at the interpersonal level. Evangeline lived in the community she served and the parents and families knew her very well, with some even going to the same church. Building on her interpersonal relationships, Evangeline showed leadership at the communal level as she worked to build bridges within and across the various families in her community. The Burmese refugee community encompasses diverse language and cultural groups, and Evangeline herself did not speak Karen or the Malay and Burmese languages of some of her families. Her community meetings brought in families across these various backgrounds, thus expanding the families’ social capital. This could be a challenge for her, but she was committed to inclusion – when necessary, she used Language Line or even Google Translate to help with communication.

School policies and the cultural expectations of schooling were a large focus of her work. Evangeline organized parent workshops for newcomer students and parents where she could explain

school policies to the families: “We want to let the parent know the expectations from the school. It can be attendance policy – dress code, all those kind of things that we have to let the parents know.” When Burmese families got a call from the school, they would contact Evangeline about what it meant:

We try to go visit with the classroom and meet with the teacher. When the teacher reaches out to us, we explain in more detail because sometimes, of course, the teacher will [be] upset. Some teachers come and – when they need help, you know, they don’t know what to do with a student.

Evangeline also helped the counselors and school staff “whenever our students have issue. It can be behavior issue or a discipline issue. We have to help our parents and students to communicate with each side – students, teachers, parents.” Evangeline built bridges between Burmese families and their children’s teachers. She facilitated communication between the two, allowing the families’ aspirational capital to be expressed and helping the teachers to understand the cultural dynamics that might underlie behaviors or discipline issues.

Sometimes, she was called upon to explain cultural norms to teachers. For example, a parent might not come to a conference called by a teacher. Evangeline explained that families in her community are used to teachers having full authority to discipline a student. Thus, when a family is called because of a discipline issue, the parent might not come, either because of their work schedule or because they are not used to being called in on discipline issues. She said,

And the challenge part is that, of course, in most of Asian culture, when the students and – the parents and the student choose the school, the teacher has full authority. I mean, like they can discipline. They can do whatever – it doesn’t mean that they can, you know, they can abuse. It mean[s] that they can punish. So here, what’s really challenge for me is that even sometime when I have to call the parents, because of their work schedule, or because they think that it is not important to be part of the school setting. It’s not that they don’t want to, it’s just that they are not used to it.

As Evangeline concluded, “My main role is that I am bridging among the students, school, community, and the parents, so it can be culturally or linguistically – and, you know, not only the culture, and then, their backgrounds, and then the school system.”

Evangeline helped families understand how to apply to preschool for their children or start the high school selection process. She explained what happens in standardized testing, and what the expectations are for parental participation in parent-teacher conferences. Beyond just “language,” Evangeline knew how to explain special services such as speech therapy or special education or other school issues to parents: “so instead of just directly interpreting to the family, I have to use how the family can understand – the reason that I call them today.”

We highlight here the role that Evangeline played in leveraging the CCW of her families with their schools. Without her bridging work, the families might not have understood school expectations of involvement, and schools might have characterized parents as uninvolved and uninterested in their children’s educations. In fact, the families showed substantial aspirational capital by trusting the schools and teachers with the education of their children and giving them authority over their children in the schools. Inasmuch as Evangeline’s work allowed immigrant and refugee families to be more actively involved in school practices and expanded teachers’ understandings of values behind seemingly resistant behaviors, we see this work as part of the communal dimension of social justice leadership that leverages families’ familial, aspirational, linguistic, and navigational capital.

Evangeline showed social justice leadership at the ecological level as well. With multiple roles in the school district and the Office of Migrant Education, she was knowledgeable about resources that could help support the families within the community:

Other information that I provide can be like, education saving plan. And, as we all know, we all are immigrants, so I ask someone from USCIS to come and talk about Green Card

application, citizen application. And sometimes I have to communicate with other outside agencies that the parent can benefit from, you know, any kind of resources.

Evangeline emphasized her role in providing information to the families: “So the parent knows that it’s not only me that they can come and depend, but there are other resources that we have in the community – so those kinds of information that I provided.” Here, we see Evangeline leveraging families’ aspirational, navigational, and social capital by providing connections to outside resources such as saving for college, citizenship application information, and other resources.

Evangeline’s social justice work at the ecological level was grounded in her commitment to include families across the larger community (the communal level). She organized workshops and information sessions that might be of interest not only to her community, but to other community groups, and she invited the other MCAs to join her. As an example, she described how she invited representatives from the mayor’s office to explain what the 2020 Census was, and invited the other MCAs:

So I know that this will be the first time for my community participating in a census, so I invited the people from the mayor’s office to talk about this kind of event. And before I organized this kind of event, I spoke with other MCAs – “Do you think that your parents will need this kind of information?” “Do you want to join with me?” So then they made decisions, then we all have [the event] together.

It is clear that this work, in turn, relied on her close interpersonal relationships and commitments to inclusion with the other MCAs:

We work together, plan meetings together. If I’m not here, Carlos supports my families, and if they cannot help, they call me, “Evangeline, this is what happened. How can we help?” So this really makes us – not only the student, even the MCA and staff in the building – we feel like we are family.

Evangeline’s social justice leadership found expression in her collaborations with other MCAs to bring together families across cultural and linguistic backgrounds to access information relevant to their shared experience as immigrants. By organizing a session with representatives from the mayor’s office, Evangeline helped the families to activate their social, navigational, and aspirational capital to access their right of participation in larger civic life.

In conclusion, Evangeline’s work as an MCA showed social justice leadership across the personal, interpersonal, communal, and ecological dimensions. Her efforts at the ecological level were especially notable in her interview. Her work leveraged community cultural wealth in developing the linguistic, familial, aspirational, navigational, and social capital of the families in her community.

Discussion

While cultural brokering has been understood as a practice of facilitating communication between schools and diverse families, it has rarely been understood as social justice leadership. Our study revealed the ways MCAs work as social justice leaders through their practices at various levels. Fundamentally, the three MCAs in our study were committed to inclusion and equity for their families through their own experiences and values and expressed their commitment as the critical foundation of their work. While these personally held values were their foundations, their practices as MCAs were rooted at the interpersonal level as they worked with individual families, teachers, and counselors to increase communication and understanding in multiple settings. The trust they built through these relationships and activities allowed them to work in larger group settings such as the Home-School Association and even address school systems and larger social structures.

Studies warn that cultural brokering can be a system-preserving, non-reciprocal practice in which families are required to fit into school practices (Auerbach, 2009; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Ladky & Peterson, 2008). Our study, however, highlighted the way that MCAs can work to expand rather than preserve the status quo by recognizing and leveraging the cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) of their families as a resource for the larger school community.

Our findings are limited to the examples that appear in these transcripts. Not every dimension of social justice leadership and not every form of CCW was seen to be activated by each MCA. However, as a group, the MCAs in our study expanded the linguistic capital of their multilingual families, emphasized their extraordinary aspirational and navigational capital, and leveraged familial and social relationships for the benefit of the entire school community. They also supported resistance capital throughout the school community when necessary to address social injustice in the larger society.

Expanding linguistic capital was fundamental to the social justice leadership of the MCAs. Language is the basis of the MCA job description, and linguistic capital allowed the interviewees entry into their communities. Through the MCAs connecting linguistically and not requiring families to move to “English only” (but rather, English-additional) communication, families’ linguistic capital was sustained and encouraged across the school community. The MCAs relied upon the families’ current linguistic capital to share information. By translating at Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and other school-based meetings and events, the MCAs opened the door for multilingual families to participate in discussions and decision-making processes that they could not have otherwise accessed.

The MCAs also emphasized the aspirational and navigational capital of their families. On personal and cultural levels, the MCAs understood the multilingual families’ aspirations for their children through education, despite systemic inequities and structural barriers. The MCAs endeavored to support multilingual families by showing them how to navigate the educational system, starting with the policies and procedures of their children’s schools. Through monthly workshops where the families were introduced to key school personnel and academic vocabulary, the MCAs translated what was said and, more importantly, the meaning of what was said. As a result, many multilingual families were able to better position themselves to access educational resources and partake in academic opportunities.

This was not just a one-way, non-reciprocal process, however. The MCAs worked to change the school system by debunking and demystifying stereotypes about multilingual families for teachers and school leaders alike. From explaining the influx of Spanish-speaking students mid-academic year to clarifying why Burmese parents defer to their children’s teachers, the MCAs challenged deficit-oriented rationales for the families’ cultural practices and expanded the school staff’s understanding of the multilingual families in the school community.

The MCAs expanded the membership and involvement of families in the schools. They encouraged their families to participate as volunteers in school and made it possible for them to do so. They changed the process of the Home-School Association to offer multilingual families a seat at the table for discussions about school issues.

The MCAs also supported multilingual families in navigating systems beyond the school community. From learning more about resources for higher education to securing green cards, the MCAs acted as translators and advocates for multilingual families. They helped to organize the larger school community of teachers and parents when a member of their community was wrongfully detained by ICE. Working across the systemic and ecological dimensions of social justice leadership, the MCAs sought to transform their schools with the understanding that schools are embedded within the larger sociopolitical context of US society.

In short, this study shows how MCAs operated as social justice leaders in the school communities in ways that made their school communities more inclusive of multilingual families.

While most literature on social justice leadership has emphasized the role of school administrators as leaders, a few studies have shown that other members of the school community are also able to engage in leadership practices through forms of “distributed leadership” (Brooks et al., 2007; DeMatthews et al., 2016). Although this is beyond the scope of the current paper, we saw in our research that other members of the school community also played informal leadership roles in promoting equity and inclusion in the school community. Thus, we point out the need in our field for a wider view of leadership and leadership functions in school communities than that which has been taken up to now.

Limitations

There were several limitations in the study. First, we relied heavily on interviews as the primary data source. We did not have an opportunity to conduct observations of events or meetings led by the MCAs. The COVID-19 pandemic cut short our data collection period. While we received rich information from the current data, we recognize that having additional data to supplement the interviews would have offered a more nuanced understanding of the work of the MCAs with the families across each of the schools. Perhaps by collecting other types of data, we could have seen other dimensions of CCW and social justice leadership that were not evident in the interview data alone.

In addition, the research team members were outsiders to each of the school communities. Designing the study as a participatory action research study or collaborative study with MCAs would have positioned them differently in the research project.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our study contributes to the research on multilingual family engagement by showing how MCAs served as social justice leaders within their school communities. Multilingual counseling assistants play an important role in building meaningful relationships with multilingual families, drawing on the assets and strengths of their CCW, and engaging multilingual families in their children’s educations. Greater attention should be given to the roles of MCAs in promoting equity and inclusion in schools. We call upon school districts to revisit policies and practices for hiring, retention, professional development, and promotion for individuals in these roles.

Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge the work of Janel Dia, a member of the research team in the data collection stage of the research.

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