

Research Article

Bridging Classrooms and Living Rooms: How Teacher Leaders Foster Positive, Culturally Responsive School Family Relationships

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Abstract

Family engagement is widely recognized as essential to student success, yet many existing approaches remain limited in scope, episodic in nature, and insufficiently responsive to the cultural diversity present in today's schools. When family engagement efforts fail to acknowledge and honor the backgrounds, values, and experiences of diverse families, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, participation can become uneven or exclusionary. This study examines how teacher leaders who intentionally cultivate cultural sensitivity and inclusivity can serve as vital connectors between schools and families, transforming engagement from isolated events into sustained, collaborative partnerships. Using a methodological review of current literature, this study identified several key themes that illuminate the potential of culturally responsive teacher leadership. Findings indicate that teacher leaders must develop and employ a leadership repertoire grounded in cultural awareness, relational trust, and inclusive communication practices. Such competencies enable teacher leaders to design family engagement models that are accessible, affirming, and adaptable to the needs of all families. The review also highlights the importance of creating safe, welcoming spaces where families feel valued as co-educators and contributors to their children's academic growth. When teacher leaders intentionally elevate family voices, honor cultural strengths, and foster equitable participation, families shift from occasional attendees to active partners in decision-making processes that shape the educational environment. This transition not only strengthens home-school relationships but also promotes shared responsibility for student learning and well-being. The outcomes of this research have meaningful implications for schools, districts, and policymakers. Culturally responsive teacher leadership can inform professional development, guide the creation of inclusive engagement frameworks, and influence policy initiatives designed to increase equity and family participation. By positioning teacher leaders as catalysts for culturally grounded partnerships, schools can cultivate environments where all students and families feel seen, respected, and supported.

Keywords

Family Engagement, Schools, Students, Culture, Pedagogy, Cultural Responsiveness

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Modern educators are more than educators, hence the emergence of concepts such as teacher leaders. Teacher leaders have been defined as educators who come out of the comfort of their classrooms to partake leadership roles in many forms or shapes, both within the formal or informal setting [21]. Teacher leaders view themselves as inherently influential without needing to take on any administrative responsibilities and collaborate with all stakeholders, including learners, colleagues, and parents, to leverage the students' performance [21]. In addition, one of the most significant attributes that teacher leaders hold is the ability to build relationships. They also guide others, including learners, educators, and parents, to a shared aspiration, which is to improve educational experience [6]. This leadership is viewed as a bridge that can connect and strengthen the relationship between schools and families. It is a well-documented fact that families are essential for the academic performance of the learner. Researchers have shown that parental involvement has a positive impact on the academic performance of learners, particularly adolescents. For this reason, learning institutions should strive to strengthen this relationship, ensuring that it is robust and culturally responsive. Teacher leaders, equipped with cultural sensitivity and inclusivity practices, act as school-family bridge builders who convert engagement from episodic events into ongoing, co-created partnerships that advance equity, trust, and student flourishing.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the significance of family engagement as has been shown in research, the inconsistency raises fundamental concerns. The inconsistency is influenced by various factors, which can broadly be classified as parent-facing and school-facing. The parent-facing reasons include parents' limited knowledge about school activities, conflicting schedules, and lack of time [18]. For its part, the school-facing issues include a lack of effort and fragmented or marginalized programs that do not motivate the parents [7]. More importantly, parents grappling with cultural or linguistic barriers are more likely to feel unwelcome, marginalized, and even powerless, curtailing their involvement in the affairs of their school-going children [13]. Essentially, this means that some families are more likely to feel engaged than others. In addition, learning institutions have failed to create platforms for continuous collaboration between the school and the parents. Instead, the existing framework favors one-time events, such as parent-teacher days, that do not lay the foundation for a meaningful partnership that enables the learner to achieve the much-needed academic excellence.

1.3. Purpose and Significance

The study is unique due to its ability to integrate leadership, cultural sensitivity, inclusive practices, and academic performance. Specifically, this research aims to demonstrate how teacher leaders, applying the tenets of cultural sensitivity and inclusive practices, can apply family engagement strategies that promote continuous partnerships that foster trust, equity, and respect, enabling the learners to thrive. The significance of the study can be viewed from an academic and practical standpoint. Academically, this study hopes to fill the existing gap concerning how teachers can apply their leadership skills to transform family engagement from one-off events to a periodic practice that is inclusive. From a practical standpoint, this research uncovers the leadership practices that are more likely to build culture-sensitive and inclusive school-family relationships. Educators can also recognize attributes that make family engagement more meaningful and impactful to the students' academic success.

1.4. Research Questions

The two main research questions for this study are:

1. RQ1: What leadership practices do teacher leaders enact that build positive, culturally inclusive school-family relationships?
2. RQ2: To what extent are teacher leader-led partnership practices associated with improvements in student engagement and climate indicators?

1.5. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The underlying theoretical model that forms the basis of this research is culturally responsive pedagogy and leadership. At the heart of the theory is the significance of the students' culture in shaping instruction and interaction in the learning environment. According to [16], both educators and the school leadership must recognize the learner's culture, including their familial background, integrating these tenets into teaching and the broader school life. It is only when the school does this that it can achieve a truly inclusive environment. Some of the underlying elements include cultural humility, whereby the teacher applies cultural relativist rather than ethnocentric lenses in making judgments. Another aspect related to the theory is the asset-based view, where culture is considered a useful resource for learning rather than a hindrance [23].

The conceptual framework takes the shape of an integration model. Teacher leaders operate at the intersection of culture, instruction, and community to strengthen reciprocal relationships. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework.

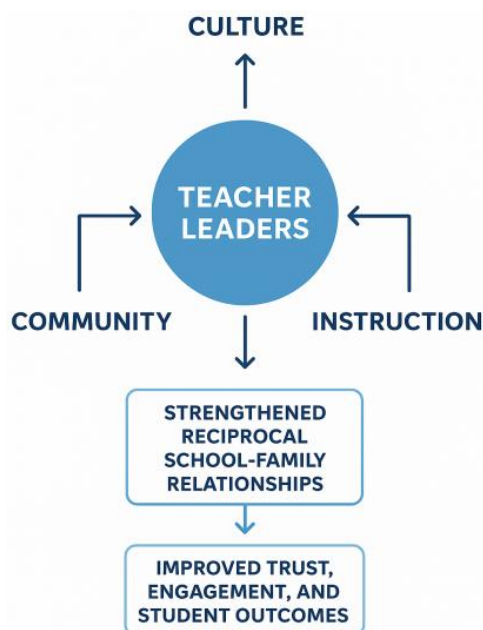


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

1.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter lays the foundation for the study by identifying the background, problem statement, purpose, significance, and research question. It recognizes the significance of teacher leadership and its potential role in enhancing inclusive and continuous parental involvement. The outcomes of this study will have both academic and practical relevance for educators, particularly those working in multicultural settings.

2. Literature Review

The literature review began with a search process for scholarly materials. The keywords used include “teacher leader,” “family engagement,” “barriers to family engagement,” “co-design of learning,” and “family advisory groups.” The search engines used included Google Scholar, Cochrane, PubMed, and PsycINFO. The first search yielded 87 sources. However, an inclusion and exclusion criterion was established to ensure that the sources left were appropriate. Materials had to be credible, either a book or a peer-reviewed article. It had to contain relevant information related to the subject matter. Research were included if they contained important theoretical or conceptual information.

2.1. Teacher Leader Roles

The role of a teacher as a leader is a concept that is emerging in the contemporary academic world. Teacher leaders have a strategic influence that they can exercise while working alone or with others [19]. The goal is to inspire positive change to influence the learners’ positive outcomes

[19]. Teacher leader roles may differ from one individual to another. Examples include a coach, mentor, facilitator, and advocate. As coaches, teachers are more concerned with the development of the learner than with knowledge sharing. Moreover, educators who embrace the role of a coach ensure that the learner can independently discharge their duties [22]. As mentors, teachers strive to guide the learner as role models, mitigating undesired behaviors while promoting positive ones, such as leadership and academic performance [5]. In their capacity as advocates, teachers recognize that their role extends beyond teaching. It also encompasses providing opinions and perspectives that eventually shape policy and law [17]. Their goal is to act on behalf of the learner to develop ideas that will be useful in guaranteeing that the student’s welfare and well-being are catered to. Lastly, as facilitators, the educator’s leadership role entails creating a favorable learning environment that enhances student motivation and academic performance [3].

A few studies have attempted to connect these leadership roles to family engagement. The leadership role of participation has been found to be the most effective in strengthening family engagement. Cahyono and Rusiadi [1] asserted that as facilitators, teachers model an enabling environment that motivates the student to achieve excellence. Facilitation may extend outside the classroom to incorporate activities that lay the foundation for family engagement, such as building communication channels and setting up liaison opportunities [10]. Besides the role of a facilitator, teacher leaders can also influence engagement as advocates. As advocates, teachers use their expert opinions to influence decisions at the policy level [4]. Family engagement remains a significant policy area that parents can advocate for through structural reforms in a bid to improve learner outcomes [2]. However, there is a gap in knowledge regarding how other teacher leader roles, such as coaching and mentorship, can influence family engagement.

2.2. Barriers to Family Engagement

Researchers have explored several barriers to family engagement in learning institutions. Guo and Zhao [11] identified poverty and time constraints as some of the primary issues. This is because families have to work for extended hours, limiting their ability to engage in school-related activities. Cultural barriers have also been cited as a potential barrier to parental involvement. Besides the preconceived prejudices, culture can cause communication difficulties due to differences in language [3]. In some instances, schools have poorly developed programs that focus on episodic events. Researchers like Lewis et al. [15] assert that effective school engagement programs treat the parent as a partner in a continuous collaborative process. Accordingly, these one-off events have little impact on the academic development of the learner. Lastly, another common challenge or barrier is the limited family involvement in the design of engagement

strategies [12]. As such, learning institutions end up creating programs that may not favor a section of parents.

2.3. Effective Practices

In light of the barriers explored, one of the best practices in promoting effective parental engagement in learning institutions is through multilingual communication. As elaborated by Corrado [3], language is a function of culture, and differences could lead to communication issues, alienating minority parents, particularly people of color and immigrants. He et al. [12] asserted that schools should be able to adapt their communication needs to meet the needs of parents who do not speak the dominant language. An example is the school's ability to offer translation and interpretation services. As illustrated by the authors, "When schools adapt their communication strategies to meet multilingual families' needs, it increases trust between families and schools, encourages family engagement, and activates family assets" [12].

2.4. Co-design of Learning

Lewis et al. [15] emphasized the need for considering the family as an equal partner in the academic affairs of the learner. Co-design refers to a framework that allows teachers and families to collaborate in shaping learning goals and classroom projects [20]. He et al. [12] asserted that the co-design framework is a broad-based framework that values the family's continued feedback and suggestions in ensuring shaping engagement and other core activities that are directly related to learning.

2.5. Community-based Events

School engagement activities should be conducted outside the learning environment and within the community. Reina et al. [19] viewed the community as an essential place for social interactions that promote authentic learning. Working in this environment ensures that the learner can apply the concepts they learnt in the classroom to real-life situations [9]. Community-based events make the family engagement enriching by breaking away from the monotonous parents' day activities. McAlister [17] asserted that parents and teachers have the opportunity to blend cultural, artistic, and academic aspects that improve learner well-being and academic achievement.

2.6. Inclusive Climate

Inclusivity remains a significant antecedent for any successful parental engagement program. The need for inclusivity extends beyond the classroom. It requires educators to apply the principles of equality when interacting with parents, thereby creating a favorable environment for diverse families [14]. The inclusivity also goes beyond culture

and incorporates the needs of special needs students, including those living with disability [8]. Some of the interventions that could be used to achieve inclusivity include allowing for cultural and linguistic diversity. Moreover, families, regardless of their social and economic standings, should be able to contribute to the affairs of the learners [12].

2.7. Limitations

As previously noted, there is a shortage in the literature connecting teacher leadership with engagement strategies. For instance, there is a need for more studies on how coaching and mentorship aspects can make a teacher leader more impactful in promoting family engagement. Despite the significance of family advisory groups in education and healthcare, it is unclear how the institution can promote better family engagement due to its underrepresentation in the literature. Lastly, there is also limited information to connect teacher leadership and inclusivity or equality frameworks within the learning environment.

3. Findings

The aim of this study is to explore how teacher leaders can use various strategies to create ongoing school-family partnerships that foster equity, trust, and student success. Through a broad literature review, several themes were found. Among them are cultural sensitivity, instructional co-design, and inclusivity structures.

3.1. Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity has emerged as one of the primary themes related to this subject matter. For instance, He et al. [12] emphasized the need for multilingualism through investing in translation and interpretation services for parents who do not speak the dominant language. Moreover, Koskela and Sinkkonen [14] stressed the significance of equality as a framework for accepting parents from different cultural backgrounds. This aligns with the asset-based view, where culture is viewed as an enabler rather than a hindrance to parental engagement.

3.2. Instructional Co-design

A major finding from the research is the role of the family as a co-designer of both the engagement strategy and instruction [15]. Families, particularly parents, must be included in decisions that determine their involvement in the affairs of their children. As partners, their feedback and opinions should be incorporated into any programs designed to bridge the gap between the home and the school. Generally, it is only through the integration of family aspects into the engagement that the home-bridge learning bridges can be closed.

3.3. Inclusivity Structures

Inclusivity is achieved through multiculturalism, multilingualism, and offering every family the right to contribute regardless of their social and economic standings [12]. It also requires accommodative practices that aim to include underserved communities, including those living with

disabilities [8]. Community-based approaches also create a framework for inclusivity. As illustrated by McAlister [17], working in the community offers families and teachers the opportunity to blend cultural, artistic, and academic aspects that improve learner well-being and academic achievement. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1. Summary of the Findings and Supporting Literature.

Theme	Supporting Literature
Cultural sensitivity	He et al. [12]; Koskela and Sinkkonen [14]
Instructional co-design	He et al. [12]; Lewis et al. [15]
Inclusivity structures	Gaspar and Sahay [8]; McAlister [17]

4. Discussion

4.1. Role of Teachers as Cultural Brokers and Relational Leaders

Teacher leaders are cultural brokers because they bridge the gap between schools and families – particularly those from diverse groups. As illustrated in the review and thematic analysis, the teacher applies multiple skills, from advocacy to facilitation, culture awareness, and inclusivity, to build or strengthen relationships with families. Their role as cultural brokers and relational leaders aligns with the cultural responsive pedagogy framework, where the students' culture and familial background are considered as assets in their holistic success [16]. Teachers embrace cultural humility and use cultural relativist lenses to engage with parents, ensuring that they feel welcomed and empowered to participate in the academic affairs of the learners.

4.2. What Shifts When Families Are Partners

Several shifts occur when families are treated as partners and not mere participants in the academic realm. Families feel a shared sense of responsibility in impacting the learners' performance. As such, parents and caregivers have an equal sense of duty and accountability. Also, unlike in traditional models of participation, families have a hands-on experience in designing instruction and influencing pedagogical elements. More importantly, families can embrace their cultural values, which are a foundational asset in learning, leading to authentic experiences. Therefore, this shift transforms families from passive observers to active stakeholders in the education of the students.

4.3. Implications for Equity

The findings of this research have significant implications for equity. Traditionally, culture has been a considerable deterrent to family engagement. Other factors, such as language differences, have further made it challenging for the historically marginalized groups to participate in the affairs of their children's education. Nonetheless, a teacher leader approach that prioritizes cultural sensitivity and inclusivity transforms culture into an asset or an enabler. It reduces the differential access to learner activities that could eventually widen the achievement gaps that already occur along cultural, racial, and socioeconomic lines. Moreover, historically marginalized voices, particularly the indigenous people, can be integrated and empowered to become co-designers in the affairs of the learners.

5. Implications for Practice and Policy

5.1. Schools and School Districts

Learning institutions must focus on building teacher leader skills, particularly those that have been proven to have the most significant impact on family engagement. Among them are advocacy, which empowers the educator to push for policies that support increased family participation in the affairs of the learner. Through cultural sensitivity, teacher leaders will create a respectful environment where everyone feels valued and appreciated. Family members can participate without the fear of stigma, prejudice, or discrimination. Also, teacher leaders must learn the fundamentals of creating an all-inclusive environment where everyone is accommodated and welcomed, regardless of their shortcomings. School districts can play an active role in ensuring that teachers

receive ongoing capacity-building programs that cultivate these skills.

In line with the asset-based model, there is a need to transform culture from a hindrance or barrier to an enabler. One way to do so is to equip learning institutions with resources that promote multilingual communication. For instance, schools can be equipped with professional translators and interpreters who work collaboratively with teachers and families during their ongoing partnerships to facilitate communication.

Schools must remain creative and dynamic in their approach to family engagement. Rather than using traditional models like parents' day that are less frequent and inadequate in their approach to involve the family, more innovative ways should be devised. An example is through community models that promote authentic learning and allow learners, teachers, and parents to interact within a real-life setting where students can apply their practical skills. Schools must remain open to feedback and ideas from all stakeholders when co-designing these programs.

5.2. Policy

Policies should be developed to support the integration of family engagement metrics into school improvement. There is a need to have a framework that empirically captures school-family partnerships and their potential implications for academic success and the holistic development of the child. In this way, this form of collaboration can be applied as an indicator of success.

Furthermore, policies around incentivizing teachers who embrace family engagement should be developed. Schools should receive the much-needed funding that enables them to recognize and appreciate educators who take on the additional responsibility of partnering with parents for the betterment of the learner. This can be in the form of a stipend to motivate learners and create an inclusive environment that values the school-home connection.

Lastly, schools should develop policies that strive to eliminate linguistic barriers. For instance, a funding policy can provide the much-needed resources, including translators, interpreters, and artificial intelligence that could help in changing documents to different languages for diverse audiences. As such, this directive will ensure that parents can access all vital records in the language of their preference.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this research has shown that teacher leaders, equipped with cultural sensitivity and inclusivity practices, act as school-family bridge builders who convert engagement from episodic events into ongoing, co-created partnerships that advance equity, trust, and student flourishing. Cultural response teachers are cultural brokers and relational leaders who ensure healthy collaboration

between the school and the family. Teacher training should focus on equipping them with skills, such as cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and equity, in order to enable them to create a safe environment where families can feel secure as they co-design the learner's instructional environment. As such, families should feel motivated to participate through inclusivity, equity, and the recognition of community spaces, from which the learner emanates. Future studies on this matter should take a more explorative approach, gathering qualitative data from teachers and community members on how to effectively develop inclusive and ongoing collaborative frameworks.

Author Contributions

Louis Langdon Warren is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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