



**Lisa M. Dorner**

(dornerl@missouri.edu) is an associate professor at University of Missouri-Columbia.



**Kim Song**

(songk@umsl.edu) is a professor at University of Missouri-St. Louis.



**Sujin Kim**

(skim222@gmu.edu) is an assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University in Virginia.



**Lina Trigos-Carrillo**

(lina.trigos@unisabana.edu.co) is a professor at Universidad de la Sabana in Colombia.



## MULTILINGUAL **FAMILY** ENGAGEMENT

**Shifting the focus from what families need to how they can lead**

By **Lisa M. Dorner, Kim Song, Sujin Kim, & Lina Trigos-Carrillo**

*m*igration. Whether searching for greater opportunities or enriching experiences, or escaping poverty or war, people are on the move.

Worldwide, the United Nations reports that more than 250 million people do not live in the country where they were born, an increase of 49% since 2000. In the United States, the percentage of children who have at least one immigrant parent or caregiver grew from 18% to 27% between 1997 and 2017. More than 20% of households speak a language other than English. Some schools that have never served students who speak other languages now have to design English language development or bilingual education programs.

How do schools manage this kind of change? Some offer interpreters at parent–teacher conferences.

Others send home weekly newsletters translated by Google or invite parents and caregivers to read storybooks with their students. A few even arrange family dinners or visit families at home to share information about their children’s learning.

As teacher educators working with school districts throughout Missouri, we have witnessed and encouraged these approaches. We love when educators share information in families’ home languages and reach out to families where they live.

That said, we also believe building integrated communities and sustaining families’ multiliteracies and languages is essential. As part of developing linguistically and culturally sustaining pedagogies, we’ve explored: How can we shift our perspective from what immigrant families *need* to how they can *lead*?

Here, we share some lessons learned through our work, including our National Professional Development project, SEE-TEL: Strengthening Equity and Effectiveness for Teachers of English Learners ([see-tel.org](http://see-tel.org)), a U.S. Department of Education grant-funded program from the Office of English Language Acquisition.

## A community-building, family literacy event

Our work started in one Spanish language immersion school that was serving about 15% of students from Spanish-speaking immigrant households. Recognizing the challenges faced by heritage language families attending traditional (English-only) “literacy nights,” we worked with the principal to create an event that privileged family stories and the Spanish language. Aiming to include at least one third of participants from immigrant families, the school sent home invitations in Spanish and followed up with phone calls. The event started with a professional bilingual storyteller who performed his story for the whole school only in Spanish. Then

we hosted a storytelling workshop for a select number of families who signed up ahead of time.

By most accounts, the event was a success. Thirteen families attended the workshop, including three households whose fathers spoke Spanish as a native language and one family from Taiwan. Moreover, five mothers and their children attended subsequent workshops, during which they designed and eventually published their own storybooks.

Although we believe this event *sustained* families’ languages and cultures—by privileging a language other than English and family stories—we learned important lessons. First, even though one third of the families who attended our workshops were bilingual, only one participating family included recent immigrants, and all students who attended said English was their dominant language. Second, we neglected to work directly with families or students and classroom teachers to *lead* the event. The literacy day was designed and led by administrators and university partners.

What if we shifted our perspective and worked directly with families and classroom teachers? What if they were the leaders?

## Families at the center

In our current professional development project with four districts across Missouri, we have presented this idea of families at the center through graduate coursework and professional development. Classroom teachers, who rarely viewed themselves as leaders in family engagement efforts, studied traditional approaches versus linguistically/culturally sustaining ones. We discussed:

- What events do families want to lead?
- What do families value in their children’s education?
- What stories do families and students want to share?

The results were impressive. Four SEE-TEL teachers from one rural district, which had many families from Central America, invited at least one immigrant parent/caregiver each to create new family

engagement efforts. Their planning meetings began simply as discussions (in Spanish): What do families value? What would you like to see?

Together, they developed a Mother’s Day event inspired by traditions in Guatemala. Two immigrant bilingual mothers led the event, designing the program and recruiting students to present poems, dances, songs, and other artwork that thanked their mothers. This meant students were also leaders in the event, working together on a wide range of performances.

Meanwhile, the four teachers played important supporting roles, setting up the space, coordinating games, and working as photographers. More than 200 families attended, most of them Spanish speakers.

A teacher who collaborated with the leading families reflected that she was ready for “Hispanic parents to be *leaders* in the community.” Teachers talked about how the school was now a space for immigrant families “to take on leadership roles or plan and run events.” This new framework empowered families, students, and their closest partner—the classroom teacher—to lead school–family partnerships.

## Flipping the script

A growing body of research suggests that traditional family engagement in schools fails to incorporate multilingual and immigrant communities in meaningful and empowering ways. This contributes to ongoing marginalization based on race, ethnicity, class, language, and immigrant status.

Too often, schools view home languages and cultures as deficits, with families merely *receiving* information and services. Our story of families’ and teachers’ leadership in designing inclusive and empowering family programs encourages us to flip the script.

If families and classroom teachers are at the center of family engagement, they will be leaders and agents, and together we can transform our English-only and monolingual spaces to multilingual, culturally sustaining ones. ■