

## Article 75

### **Bridging the Language Divide: Creating Multilingual Collaborations Between Families With Spanish Language Dominance and Non-Spanish Speaking School Counselors**

Paper based on programs presented at the 2015 North Carolina Counseling Association Annual Conference, February 2015, Greensboro, NC, and the 2012 North Carolina School Counseling Association Annual Conference, November 2012, Pinehurst, NC.

Lynn Z. Tovar

Tovar, Lynn Z., is a counselor at a behavioral health clinic in Durham, NC, where she works with Latino individuals and families. She has a PhD in Counseling and Counselor Education from North Carolina State University. Her research interests include issues of acculturation and immigration.

#### **Abstract**

Increased linguistic diversity in school communities requires that counselors focus on building multilingual collaborations, regardless of counselors' linguistic abilities. Addressing the language gap calls for advocacy for relevant resources, bridging behaviors, knowledge of how to work with language interpreters, and evaluation of service delivery and environment. With a focus on working with families with Spanish language dominance, recommendations for school counselors and two case studies are provided.

*Keywords:* Latino immigrants, school counselors, parent engagement, culturally informed counseling, limited English proficiency

The United States has always been linguistically diverse. With indigenous languages predating the arrival of European explorers and colonists, shifting patterns of immigration (including forced migration) and geopolitical land acquisitions have resulted in a country in which one out of five people in the United States spoke a language other than English in their homes (Shin & Kominski, 2010). At the school level, individuals described as English Language Learners currently make up 9.3% of the school population (Kena et al., 2016). This percentage is projected to continue to grow.

School counselors with the professional and ethical charge of supporting all students are increasingly called upon to interact with families of diverse language backgrounds in the provision of information related to students' well-being, college and career choice, and academic outcomes (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012). Today, with 50 million individuals of Hispanic origin, the home

language for many of these families is Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Various experts have called for an increase in the number of bilingual (ideally bicultural) school counselors to provide needed outreach to a population that is seeing disproportionate dropout rates (e.g., Eckenrod-Green & Culbreth, 2008; Smith-Adcock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba, & Indelicato, 2006; Sue, Fujino, Hu, Takeuchi, & Zane, 1991). Implementing strategic initiatives to recruit and retain individuals with diverse language and cultural backgrounds is important for many reasons. However, focusing on that as the only solution may be a case of *too little, too late*. Each day push and pull factors collide in the lives of individual students impacting their academic performance and persistence. School counselors, with their advanced training in interpersonal communication and multicultural counseling, can have a positive impact in this dilemma, regardless of their different linguistic capacities.

School counselors already know that education is important. Among the many reasons, having a high school diploma continues to yield a notable statistical advantage in lower unemployment rates (8.3% vs. 12.4%) and median weekly earnings (\$652 vs \$471) over having less than a high school diploma (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Moreover, despite college costs that continue to rise, formal education beyond high school corresponds with even lower unemployment rates and higher earnings. These statistics underscore the importance that education plays in economic mobility and diminished economic marginalization. With 11.8% of all U.S. born Hispanic students and 34% of all Hispanic students who are foreign born leaving school without completing their degree, addressing the unique needs of this group of students continues to merit the concerted attention of the school counseling community (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & Kewalramani, 2011).

Creating a school environment that supports student achievement and encourages student persistence is an effort that reaches beyond the walls of the school. The involvement of parents in these efforts is seen as critical, including by ASCA (2012), which specifies the importance of collaboration among parents, school counselors, and other educators in a successful school counseling program. Parent-school engagement overall correlates to higher student achievement as well as benefits for schools (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Peña, 2001). Challenges often cited in discussions of engagement of Hispanic parents in these important collaborations are perceived and actual language barriers between Spanish-speaking parents and the school staff (Carreon et al., 2005). Although the majority of individuals who speak Spanish at home in the United States speak English “well” or “very well,” 29.12% of this group do not (Shin & Kominski, 2010). Thus, in the efforts to meet the goal of serving all students, school counselors are called upon to develop requisite skills in working effectively within situations that require bridging a language gap. Through case scenarios and discussion, the goal for this article is to help the school counselor develop these important skills.

### **Creation of Multilingual Collaborations Through Bridging Behaviors**

School counselors have frequent occasions that require communication with parents of students in their case load. By telephone and in-person, school counselors communicate important information to parents about student attendance, school behavior, the college application process, and concerns for student safety. The presence of language

differences in counseling and consultation situations adds complexity but is not beyond the grasp of non-Spanish speaking counselors. As school counselors continue to advocate for resources that facilitate the sharing of information within a multilingual population, there are immediate actions they can take to address the language gap.

### **Working With Language Brokers and Interpreters**

School counselors can increase their competence in working with language interpreters. Best practices in working with interpreters involve recommendations for seating arrangements and briefings about the session topic and professional obligations such as confidentiality. Ideally, the school counselor and interpreter should be seated next to each other (with the interpreter slightly behind the counselor) so the parents can make eye contact with both parties. Providing pauses and, if needed, slowing down the rate of speech allows time for translation of the words spoken either by the language broker, the interpreter, or by the parents themselves, who may be stronger in receptive (i.e., understanding what is spoken) than expressive (i.e., speaking) English skills. School counselors can and should maintain their normal volume of speech. The use of slang and colloquialisms should be avoided, as the essence of the expression is often difficult to translate.

Often, other bilingual individuals are asked to facilitate cross-lingual exchanges, solicited either by the Spanish-speaking individual or the non-Spanish speaking counselor, as related in the case scenario below.

***The unexpected parent visit.** The door to the student services office opened just as the student crowd at the end of the day had started to dwindle. In the midst of writing up one last note on a student's record before shutting down her computer for the day, Ms. Crowley, a White American female, looked up. A man and a woman stood before her. Glancing at the letter the woman held in her hand, Ms. Crowley could tell it was the announcement of a scholarship for which the application was due later that week. Marisol, a senior of Mexican descent, came rushing in behind them. After speaking to the man and woman briefly in Spanish, Marisol introduced them to Ms. Crowley commenting they were her parents and they didn't speak much English. Ms. Crowley spoke little Spanish, beyond basic greetings. She quickly calculated in her mind that she had about 10 minutes to spend with Marisol's family before needing to leave the office to get to a meeting.*

Any unexpected parent visit can provoke mixed feelings on the part of a school counselor. As highlighted in the case study above, opportunities to convey important information to parents may come at inopportune moments. Employers of parents differ in the amount of flexible scheduling provided, which leads to challenges accommodating the typical appointment schedule of a busy student services office. Lower levels of English proficiency often correlate with lower income jobs that are often the most inflexible (Mora & Dávila, 2011). Thus, the arrival of Marisol's parents at the end of the school day may present a limited window of opportunity to address questions the parents have about the scholarship application and process. Although available time may be short, school counselors can take steps to encourage subsequent parent engagement through utilizing the bridging behaviors that are described in this article.

In this first case scenario, the individual providing the Spanish-English interpretation is the daughter of the Spanish-speaking parents. This situation involving a

student as the interpreter, although not ideal, is common (Morales, Yakushko, & Castro, 2011). Despite the temptation the school counselor may experience to direct all communication to Marisol, developing an effective and respectful collaboration between parent and school counselor involves the same directional eye contact and communication that a school counselor would maintain with a parent who spoke English fluently. Acknowledging the support that the student is providing, as well as incorporating a natural conversational flow that includes words spoken directly to the parents and to the student, sets the groundwork for a collaboration built on mutual respect (e.g., “Thank you, Señor and Señora, for coming in today. My name is Ms. Crawley. Marisol, thank you for helping us with communication.”).

When the person interpreting is not a professional interpreter, sensitivity to the relationship between the parent with Spanish language dominance and the interpreter is warranted and may require patience for the type of consultation that would be provided between, for example, a case manager and the parent regardless of language spoken. School counselors will still want to ensure that they are positioned in such a way that they can direct eye contact and speech to the parent, thereby providing non-verbal and verbal cues that the parent’s role and perspective are valued.

In a national study of school counselors, Paone et al. (2010) found that the majority of participants had not received training regarding effective work with language interpreters. Adding a skill set of working with interpreters to the multicultural competencies that are already part of the school counselor master’s level training can increase the confidence a school counselor holds in working within the triadic relationship that is created when involving an interpreter in parent consultations. There is a wide range of English language abilities within the Spanish-speaking population in the United States (Shin & Kominski, 2010). Small adjustments to speech patterns can make a tremendous difference in facilitating the usage of the varying English language skills that exist for individuals from non-dominant language backgrounds.

### **Bridging Behaviors That Enhance Multilingual Exchanges**

Non-verbal communication, including body language and attending behavior, conveys powerful information that is not always the message desired by the school counselor. When circumstances are present, such as those depicted in the following case scenario, the school counselor needs to be mindful of what non-verbal message she or he is conveying so as not to present an unwelcoming reception.

***Help! No interpreter!** Mr. Kramer, an African American male, received a panicked call from Ms. Rivera. Between the school counselor’s limited Spanish and the caller’s limited English, Mr. Kramer was able to glean that Ms. Rivera was the mother of Javier, a friendly ninth-grade student of Honduran descent who had recently been disciplined for truancy. Mr. Kramer and Ms. Rivera planned a meeting for the following day so they could develop a plan together to deal with Javier’s increasing attendance problems. The next day, despite efforts of both Mr. Kramer and Ms. Rivera to secure an interpreter, none were available. Ms. Rivera arrived at Mr. Kramer’s office as scheduled at 1:30 pm after she finished her morning shift at work. This time, it was Mr. Kramer who felt panicky and a bit angry. The demographics of the school population had been changing over the past several years. The student body still consisted primarily of native speakers of*

*English; however, there was a growing population of students on his case load whose families spoke Spanish at home. This was not the first time that Mr. Kramer had to meet with a Spanish-speaking parent with no language interpreter to help. After offering a perfunctory greeting, Mr. Kramer gestured “just a moment” before picking up the telephone to make one last call down to the Spanish teacher to see if he could help.*

Consideration of traditional Latino cultural values such as *personalismo*, described as personal engagement that is demonstrated in initial interactions of small talk and acknowledgement of the family, affirms the importance of the initial interactions that are helpful in building rapport, developing trust, and demonstrating respect (Ojeda, Flores, Meza, & Morales, 2011). A difference in cultural values can contribute to heightened misunderstandings. Mr. Kramer was described in this case scenario as feeling irritated and unnerved, an internal state that can contribute to a difficulty conveying warmth and genuine interest. Moreover, the first few moments of the interaction were spent making a telephone call, perhaps leading Ms. Rivera to question whether her presence in the school was valued. Ivey and Ivey (2007) asserted the importance of constructive attending behavior in the creation of an effective counseling relationship. The importance of attending behavior also stands true in the establishment of a collaborative relationship between parent and counselor where the well-being of the child is the mutual interest. Body language that is welcoming and calm can start to pave the way for an effective multilingual exchange even when language differences exist. Through the use of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, counselors can convey certain characteristics that contribute to a sense of welcome for the parent with Spanish language dominance, thereby preparing for a collaboration that makes the most of the strengths of each player in the collaboration. These same adjustments to speech patterns that are recommended when working with and through language interpreters also enhance communication when an interpreter is not present. Equally, the components of non-verbal communication and effective counseling practice that are laid out in this article are important to apply when working with interpreters and language brokers. Implicit in all effective multilingual exchanges is a foundational framework of culturally sensitive counseling and consultation that presumes respect of differences and an understanding of one’s own cultural background and biases.

School counselors with a limited Spanish vocabulary are encouraged to use what they know, as well as continue to seek expanded language competency. In addition, school counselors can have translations of frequently heard questions or phrases available as resources within their offices, similar to the language cue cards that are available for a number of professions, such as medicine and social work. Language cue cards have visual depictions and translations of key words and phrases. (For an example, see the cue cards available at [http://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au//bhcv2/bhcht.nsf/PresentDetail?Open&s=Cue\\_Cards](http://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au//bhcv2/bhcht.nsf/PresentDetail?Open&s=Cue_Cards)).

### **Addressing the Language Divide Through Advocacy for Relevant Resources**

A number of issues are highlighted in the above scenarios, including the limited resources that exist in many school districts for the provision of language interpreters (Paone, Malott, & Maddux, 2010). Counselors in all contexts are called upon to use

qualified interpreters to ensure clients' comprehension of services (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005). Some school districts have addressed the issue of limited language interpreters through the use of *language lines*, which provide school personnel access to language interpreters on a dedicated telephone line (e.g., Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland, Anoka-Hennepin Schools in Minnesota). Given the changing demographics of the United States, the need for interpreters to facilitate understanding is predicted to grow.

In addition, the call exists for hiring more bilingual staff, including school counselors. In schools where there are a high percentage of Spanish-speaking families, the lack of such staffing can be perceived as a sign of disrespect and devaluing (Carreon et al., 2005). Increasing the number of bilingual (ideally bicultural) school counselors to provide needed outreach to the families of a population of students that is seeing disproportionate dropout rates can help strengthen communication efforts and increase cultural sensitivity.

Three problems exist, however, if we focus only on the above two strategies to bridge the language gap. First, budgets and availability of bilingual, bicultural school counselors are such that if we leave this as the only solution, many students will fall through the cracks while we wait for these counselors to be hired. Second, the burden of relationship-building may be placed primarily on the counselor who meets the "match" criteria, regardless of this individual's strengths in other school counseling program areas. Third, whether contacting an interpreter for assistance or consulting with a bilingual school counselor or staff member about a case, the verbal and non-verbal communication of the rest of the school administration and faculty will continue to give off powerful messages about the extent to which parent contributions and involvement are valued. Given the importance of the school counselor role, it is imperative to identify actions that can be taken now that challenge the status quo.

### **Evaluation of Service Delivery and Environment**

Given the importance of the role that school counselors have in providing for the academic, career, and personal/social needs of each student, school counselors are called upon to evaluate how their program services are delivered and whether changes are needed in order to reach Hispanic immigrant parents with Spanish language dominance (ASCA, 2012). These final recommendations can lead to enhanced collaborations with Spanish-speaking families. First, identify factors from the physical environment that promote or decrease involvement and a sense of welcome. Second, consider cultural values in counseling interventions. Lastly, utilize a strength-based frame of reference when considering the parents' involvement in the school and the children's lives.

A variety of academic, career, and psychosocial counseling resources are now available in Spanish. Integrating Spanish resources into the offerings available in a waiting area, as well as providing some translated signage, demonstrates confident awareness that the school community is not monolingual. As school counselors evaluate the physical environment of their office, figuratively seeing it through the lens of an individual who may have less familiarity with the United States academic system can help staff members identify potential helpful modifications in how visitors are typically greeted and provided explanations of office procedure.

Numerous scholars have recommended incorporating cultural values relevant to the target population into counseling interventions (e.g., Ceballos & Bratton, 2010; Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009). When the focus of attention is on the *challenges* of working with parents with Spanish language dominance, the tendency is to frame the efforts within a deficiency model. The perspective shifts when emphasizing the merits of such traditional cultural values found within this heterogeneous population such as *familismo*, where consideration of the immediate or extended family needs takes primacy over individual preference, and *simpatia*, or kindness/politeness.

School counselors with even limited Spanish proficiency have reported that they have been able to develop essential trust with parents with Spanish language dominance through demonstrating a level of professional warmth and taking the time to answer questions. Conversely, by “focusing on the barriers created by language” and devaluing the parents’ contributions, the parents’ active participation in partnerships was derailed (Dotson-Blake, 2010, p.110). The case scenarios presented in this article provide examples of the challenges and opportunity to build important trust, thus paving the way for multilingual collaborations.

### **Conclusion**

Given the dynamically changing demographics in the United States, the call to increase diversity within the school counseling ranks applies. Answering this call demands the strategic recruitment of counseling students with diverse backgrounds and language skills through targeted outreach as intentional as that which is being done in other professions (e.g., science and engineering). In the meantime, however, focused attention toward cultivating strong multilingual collaborations needs to continue. The alternative is too dire. Finally, sustained commitment to these multilingual collaborations is important even when a bilingual school counselor is hired. Addressing the academic, career, and personal/social needs of all students requires building strong counselor/family collaborations regardless of the language that the family and counselor speak.

### **References**

- American Counseling Association. (2005). *ACA code of ethics*. Alexandria, VA: ACA.
- American School Counselor Association. (2012). *The ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Carreon, G., Drake, C., & Barton, A. (2005). The importance of presence: Immigrant parents’ school engagement experiences. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42, 465–498.
- Ceballos, P. L., & Bratton, S. C. (2010). Empowering Latino families: Effects of a culturally responsive intervention for low-income immigrant Latino parents on children’s behaviors and parental stress. *Psychology in the Schools*, 47, 761–775.
- Chapman, C., Laird, J., Ifill, N., & Kewalramani, A. (2011). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972–2009* (NCES 2012-006). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012006.pdf>

- Dotson-Blake, K. P. (2010). Learning from each other: A portrait of family-school-community partnerships in the United States and Mexico. *Professional School Counseling, 14*, 101–114.
- Dotson-Blake, K. P., Foster, V. A., & Gressard, C. F. (2009). Ending the silence of the Mexican immigrant voice in public education: Creating culturally inclusive family-school-community partnerships. *Professional School Counseling, 12*, 230–239.
- Eckenrod-Green, W., & Culbreth, J. R. (2008). Latino high school students' perceptions and preferred characteristics of high school counselors. *Journal of School Counseling, 6*(17). Retrieved from <http://jsc.montana.edu/articles/v6n17.pdf>.
- Ivey, A., & Ivey, M. B. (2007). *Intentional interviewing and counseling: Facilitating client development in a multicultural society* (6th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Kena, G., Hussar, W., McFarland, J., de Brey, C., Musu-Gillette, L., Wang, X., . . . Dunlop Velez, E. (2016). *The condition of education 2016* (NCES 2016-144). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016144.pdf>
- Mora, M., & Dávila, A. (2011). The LEP earnings penalty among Hispanic men in the US: 1980 to 2005. In D. Leal & S. Trejo (Eds.), *Latinos and the economy: Immigration and impact in schools, labor markets, and beyond* (pp. 153–167). New York, NY: Springer.
- Morales, A., Yakushko, O. F., & Castro, A. J. (2011). Language brokering among Mexican-immigrant families in the Midwest: A multiple case study. *The Counseling Psychologist, 40*, 520–553.
- Ojeda, L., Flores, L. Y., Meza, R. R., & Morales, A. (2011). Culturally competent qualitative research with Latino immigrants. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 33*, 184–203.
- Paone, T. R., Malott, K. M., & Maddux, C. (2010). School counselor collaboration with language interpreters: Results of a national survey. *Journal of School Counseling, 8*. Retrieved from <http://jsc.montana.edu/articles/v8n13.pdf>
- Peña, D. C. (2001). Parent involvement: Influencing factors and implications. *The Journal of Educational Research, 94*, 42–54.
- Shin, H. B., & Kominski, R. A. (2010). *Language use in the United States: 2007*. American Community Survey Reports, ACS-12. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/acs/ACS-12.pdf>
- Smith-Adcock, S., Daniels, M. H., Lee, S.M., Villalba, J. A., & Indelicato, N. A. (2006). Culturally responsive school counseling for Hispanic/Latino students and families: The need for bilingual school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 10*, 92–101.
- Sue, S., Fujino, D. C., Hu, L., Takeuchi, D. T., & Zane, N. S. (1991). Community mental health services for ethnic minority groups: A test of the cultural responsiveness hypothesis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 59*, 533–540.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2013). *Employment projections: Education and training*. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/emp/tables.htm>



U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). *The Hispanic population in the United States: 2011* [Data set]. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/population/hispanic/data/2011.html>

*Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: <http://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas>*