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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Send Me a Picture and I'll Tell You What It Says": Language as Rural Cultural Wealth in Multilingual Family Engagement

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Abstract

This qualitative research study examined Multilingual Learner family engagement practices in a rural school district in the southeast United States. The district experienced increasing linguistic diversity among its student population and sought to identify engagement practices to meet families' needs. Data were collected from interviews with educators and families, observations of family engagement events, and material archive analysis from print and online sources. We theorized this work using a framework of place, or rural cultural wealth, and linguicism to identify what family engagement practices were used and how those practices met the needs of rural ML families. Findings showed that traditional family engagement activities did not tap into rural cultural wealth or ML families' linguistic or cultural strengths beyond *de minimis* compliance. We argue that reconceptualizing ML family engagement can center families' linguistic strengths and draw from rural ingenuity, unity, and familism to meet their needs. Rural schools with linguistically diverse and minoritized families will require a reimagination of family engagement practices to address persistent equity gaps for rural ML families.

Keywords

cultural wealth; family engagement; multilingual learners; place-conscious education; rural schools

INTRODUCTION

Although the population of K12 students in rural schools in the United States remains predominantly White and monolingual, there are increasing numbers of multilinguals from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Over the past decade, the population of rural students of color under the age of 10 has grown to one in three (Center for Public Education [CPE], 2023). Much of that growth is attributed to an increase in the number of Latino students who speak a language other than English in the home. In fact, Latinos in rural communities currently account for a quarter of all nonmetropolitan population growth. This growth has been so significant that scholars refer to rural Latinos as a demographic and economic "lifeline" to rural America (Lichter & Johnson, 2020, p. 785). In this study, we use Multilingual Learners (MLs) to refer to K12 students who speak one or more languages and currently receive specialized English language learning services. More than 90% of the MLs in this study were

Latino. Between 2015 and 2019, the number of ML students in rural U.S. schools increased by more than 54,000, prompting calls by educators to address the urgent needs of these students and families (Coady, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022).

There are multiple definitions of rurality used by federal agencies in the U.S. (Geverdt, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics defines rurality across four locale categories–city, suburban, town, and rural–and each contains three sub-designations. Federal categories base rurality on the distance to an urbanized center, from five to more than 25 miles away. Rurality brings with it both stereotypes of 'backwardness' (John & Ford, 2017) and community strengths (Crumb et al., 2022). However, these categories mask tremendous variation in how rural communities function and the increasingly diverse people that make up and participate in rural spaces. We use 'rural' in this study to capture the essence and unique ways schools in these federal categories function and focus on the ML families living in rural communities.

Rural demographic changes generate challenges and create new opportunities for schools and the educators who serve children and families. For instance, race, language, and immigration are intersecting issues that complicate the work of rural educators and that need untangling in teacher and leader preparation and in-service programs (Coady et al., 2022; Golombek et al., 2022). Educators must attend to the reality of nearly four decades of stalled U.S. immigration policy reform. U.S.-born children of immigrants face persistent fear of family separation, deportation, and the stark reality that they are unable to access higher education and in-state tuition due to their parents' residency status (Gándara et al., 2023). These issues are a continued source of distress and trauma (Massey, 2020) that affect students, families, and educators alike. Addressing these issues will require considerable re-imagination on the part of professionals, politicians, and educators who are entrusted to ensure equitable educational opportunities for ML students and families.

As of 2023, there were about 500,000 ML students in the rural United States (Irwin et al., 2022). While teacher preparation for ML students remains the single most important factor affecting student learning (Calderón et al., 2011), recent research shows that educators of rural ML students lack specialized preparation to serve these students (Coady et al., 2023; Lewis & Gray, 2016). Rural MLs face significant inequities in access to highly prepared teachers, digital technologies, and quality bilingual or first-language education programs (CPE, 2022; Showalter et al., 2019). National data from 2015-16 indicate that rural high schools offered the lowest number of students' first language educational programs to support ML students

(NCES, 2016). Lewis and Gray (2016) report that only 50% of rural ML students receive specialized language learning services, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, versus 89% in cities. More troublesome is that only 5% of rural U.S. high schools offer bilingual instruction for ML students versus 14% in cities, and rural schools struggle to recruit and retain qualified teachers (USGAO, 2022). New research suggests that the linguistic resources of ML students are largely un- or underutilized in rural schools and teacher preparation programs (Coady & Román, 2024; Kfouri & Rowe, 2024).

One important area of educators' work is how to support ML student learning through family engagement in their child's education. This is a complex area due to the various languages that families speak and the lack of educators who understand them; the work schedules of families and the distance they must drive to get to the school; and district funding and human resource limitations to adequately serve MLs and their families. This study examined ML family engagement practices in one rural school district in the southeast U.S. with increasing numbers of ML students. In this study, we aimed to answer: 1) *What are the ML family engagement practices used by educators in a rural district?* and 2) *How do educators meet the needs of rural ML families?* To answer these questions, we embarked on a yearlong qualitative study in one rural school district in the southeast United States.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Family engagement or involvement remains an ongoing area of concern and research (Lowenhaupt, 2014; Smith & Sheridan, 2018). Scholarship on family engagement in the United States continues to underscore key findings that shape school-home relationships and educator practices in two key ways. First, the literature underscores that family engagement has a positive effect on child learning and well-being, and second, that different family engagement practices are required for diverse student populations, including ML students (Barrueco et al., 2016; Foster et al., 2017; Jeynes, 2003). Over the past quarter century, several common school practices that aim to support families have consistently emerged. Ongoing communication and home-school interactions are important to student learning (Deslandes et al., 1997; Jeynes, 2003). However, for ML families, this involves communication in print and orally in the languages used in families' homes. Second, family participation in their children's education can vary considerably among an array of activities that take place both inside and outside of school. Historically, these activities range from traditional school events, such as attending parent-teacher conferences and participating in the school Parent-Teacher Association (PTA),

to home language and literacy development practices, such as shared bedtime reading (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Protacio et al., 2020). Research also demonstrates that family assistance in home learning has a positive effect on learning (Shumow & Miller, 2001).

Several meta-analyses also underscore these findings about impactful family engagement practices (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2003). For example, in an analysis of parental involvement that included racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse groups of students and families, Jeynes (2003) highlighted two key findings on families' influence on child educational achievement. First, parental communication with the child about school was paramount, and this included engaging in conversations related to school experiences, home learning, and the value of education. Second, parents' expectations for the child in school were explicit. Parents ensured that schoolwork was completed and repeatedly held high educational expectations, such as attending college. Home conversations about the value of education affects student learning and holds true for students from across ethnic, racial, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (He & Thompson, 2022; Jeynes, 2003). Scholars have found that the most effective family engagement activities build upon families' strengths, recognize and respond to families social and cultural differences, and provide services that meet specific family needs, such as translation and interpretation services, ESL classes, technology workshops, and mental health support (Jeynes, 2016; Kaminski et al., 2008).

Family engagement with ML families differs significantly from that of non-ML families. ML families bring an array of knowledge and experiences to the school community, such as language and communication differences, expectations of and relationships with teachers, and often experiences with borders and migration. For instance, for Latino families, *familismo* or strong bonds among extended family members can influence family engagement (Constante et al., 2019; Morales-Alexander, 2021). Familismo, which captures family obligations and strong familial networks, is central to Latino child development and socialization (Morales-Alexander, 2021). In familismo, the collective needs of the extended family are prioritized over individual needs (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). In the context of family engagement practices with Latino families, familismo influences the very nature of family participation in school events and parental expectations of child behavior and shapes how school-related tasks such as homework are taken up in the home (Niemeyer et al., 2009). For instance, Latino parents' expectations of their child's achievement are a determining factor in their academic success, yet among Latino youth, their perceived future family obligations inhibited them from engaging in advanced educational programs to support the family (Spees et al., 2017).

From the family perspective, culture and language shape how families perceive and participate in the educational activities of their children. Family expectations and 'morals' were found to be determining factors in the educational attainment of Latino students (Arellanes et al., 2019). Among Latino immigrant farm-working mothers, *consejo*s, that is, parent tips or advice to their child, was a practice used to show support for their child's education (Mazano, 2016). Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis (2012) found that Latino families formed their own educational social network and engaged in *tequio*, a southern Mexican and Guatemalan concept of community service and participation in community functioning. As families took up this work based on their own cultural knowledge and strength, family engagement was reframed from the perspective of the family and community rather than what the school prescribed was important for families to do.

As suggested in the literature, family engagement with ML families must be reconceptualized away from traditional events and expectations of family involvement and participation, such as physical presence in the school or joining the PTA, and instead shift towards culturally- and linguistically- appropriate activities that are centered on families' own concepts of family, education, community, and engagement (Arias & Morillo-Campbell, 2008). For rural schools, there are added challenges associated with rurality, funding, resources, and distance. As power shifts from the school to the home or from educators to the families, concepts of family engagement can be reimagined, and new ways of approaching family engagement for MLs can emerge.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rural Place-Conscious Education

Despite inequities in access to high-quality language education programs and qualified teachers in the United States, rural ML students and their families contribute to the vibrancy and economic expansion of their rural communities (Lichter & Johnson, 2020; Massey, 2020). We frame our work in rural cultural wealth (Crumb et al., 2022) with the role of place central to equitable education for MLs. Theories surrounding rurality argue that minoritized students' and families' capitals or strengths differ from those of mainstream, majority, (sub)urban communities. Leaning into Yosso's (2005) work, who identified 'linguistic' capital as a strength which minoritized communities rely on for survival and well-being, Crumb et al. (2022) extend this work to rural communities and note the centrality of place in community functioning. They describe how issues of equity permeate various micro and macro levels of

community functioning, namely that equity concerns occur within an "ecologically stratified habitus building from one's family to the community, the region, the nation, and globally" (p. 5). Crumb et al. (2022) theorize *rural* community wealth as an assets-based ideology that recognizes four place-conscious characteristics of rural people. These include *rural resourcefulness* (the capacity of rural people to meet and overcome social and contextual adversities), *rural ingenuity* (a characteristic of the collective community as people leverage everyday knowledge to respond creatively to challenges and by using local resources), *rural familism* (intergenerational relationships, family geographic proximity, and family lineage reinforce collective care and social networks), and *rural community unity* (how community members organize and unify for civic engagement and collaboration, particularly in times of need). Activities such as asset mapping begin to demonstrate interconnections among community members and map social networks of languaging practices that can meet the needs of linguistically- heterogeneous communities. These practices challenge deficit orientations of rural communities in general and culturally and linguistically diverse people in particular.

Greenwood's (2019) work on place-conscious education is foundational in the role of place in teaching, pedagogy, and curriculum. Place-conscious pedagogy is a "way of being and knowing" through which educators become "more deeply reflective about their own ontological experience" (p. 363). His reflection on place-conscious education challenges educators (that is, himself and us) to unpack histories of land and human oppression through critical self-reflection. For Greenwood (2019), this initiates the process of building humanizing relationships and the opportunity to reinhabit place. Place-conscious education is an ongoing process of reflection, unlearning, and reinhabitation and involves interrogating learned colonial practices and mindsets.

Place-conscious education involves three actions or movements (Greenwood, 2019). The first is a critique of existing educational practices, similar to the work of Freirean *praxis* (Freire, 1970), through the processes of reflection and action. The second includes engaging in practices that support situated and ongoing learning about people and places, that is, gaining a complex understanding of how people learn and change and under what conditions, as well as its corollary– how learning and change do not happen–particularly for colonized and minoritized groups. Third is "soul work" (Greenwood, 2019, p. 371). He suggests that educators embrace the "...traditions–often radical, suppressed, and counter-cultural traditions–that can guide our own being and becoming" (p. 371). Complex reflection and re-inhabitation allow for the creation of a new narrative that can "reweave settler culture back into the fabric

of the more-than-human lifeworld" (p. 373). Greenwood's (2019) work further supports reframing minoritized voices by tracing the origins of colonizing acts and ideologies, peeling back layers of hi/stories that have erased minoritized communities from their 'place.' These theories challenge us to deconstruct ideologies that have historically framed rural communities as linguistically homogeneous, monocultural, and monolingual, and to reinhabit those spaces through multivocality, trans- and pluri-lingual languaging practices between and across rural contexts.

Linguicism and Place

A second dimension of our theoretical lens refers to linguicism, that is, discriminatory practices and the unfair treatment of people based on the language or language variety they use. Linguicism occurs when "ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988, p. 13). Language rights, held by a person or social group, are one aspect of human rights (Klinytskyi, 2024; Skourmalla & Sounoglou, 2021; Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2010). In practice, however, the right to use one's language is more nebulous and contested. For instance, in the U.S. legal system, the right to an interpreter or translator for legal proceedings is grounded more in the 'right to a fair trial' than in the right to language itself. In education, more than three decades of research show that the use of the first or home language supports strong language and literacy development through bilingual education programs (Collier & Thomas, 2017; McField & McField, 2014). However, the right to home language use in school is heavily contested and has not been codified into law (Ruiz, 1984), and 32 states have ratified 'official English' in their state constitution (ProEnglish, 2024).

These policies and practices are made ever more complex in education following the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1971. That Act holds that "all children enrolled in public schools are entitled to equal educational opportunity without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin" (U.S. Congress, 1974/2024). Clearly, language is neither an enumerated right in the U.S. Constitution nor in national education legislation. However, to ensure that EL-ML students can participate meaningfully and equally in public education programs, oversight from the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice offer guidance to school districts and states for non-English speaking families. Non- or limited English-speaking families are entitled to information in a language they can understand about any program,

service, or activity in the same way provided to English-proficient parents (U.S. DOJ/ED, 2024). Nevertheless, information to non-English speaking parents remains an obstacle in practice (Coady, 2020; U.S. DOJ, 2015).

Linguistic discrimination is as much about language and language behavior as it is about speakers of those languages. The association of language and race, or raciolinguistics, extended from studies on linguistic discrimination in racially diverse contexts with speakers of U.S. English (Smith, 2020), though discrimination at the intersection of language and race occurs elsewhere, where different language varieties intersect with racially diverse speakers. Languages become racialized in the sense that a language variety is associated with a racial group and ideologies surrounding that group. For example, for English in the U.S., whiteness is represented through language via a "white listening subject" and "white speaking subject," while a different language variety or accented language is associated with Black, Hispanic, or other minoritized speakers of English (Flores & Rosa, 2015, pp. 150-151). For this reason, linguistic discrimination co-occurs with race and racism against minoritized groups (Nguyen & Hajek, 2022).

Linguicism and critical pedagogy of place provide a lens to examine how place intersects with language representation, language use, and, ultimately, how speakers of languages are reflected in the everyday functioning of communities. The visibility of minoritized languages in the public spaces of rural communities can offer insight into how speakers of those languages are represented and affirmed. Critical place-based pedagogy and linguicism highlight the role of place in social functioning and well-being and its intersection with language representation, language use, and power relations within rural communities.

Author Positionalities

As scholars, our backgrounds and stories shape how we understand, analyze, and interpret findings from our work in rural communities. We aim to reflect on our positionalities in order to disrupt oppressive practices and work towards reshaping spaces in humanizing ways (Greenwood, 2019). Coady grew up in a second-generation Italian immigrant family and spent her childhood in a small New England town, traversing cornfields while walking to elementary school during the late summer months. Her working, single mother and grandparents were her three primary caregivers. Because they worked, there was little time to attend school events other than formal school award ceremonies or sports events. She and her three siblings were first generation college students who learned to navigate secondary and higher education

independent of parental knowledge concerning how to do so. They were expected, however, to attend college and repeatedly encouraged to study and work hard to attain good grades. She studied international business and later taught English and Spanish in the U.S. and abroad before completing an MEd and PhD in bilingual education.

Lewis was raised on a small family farm in a rural area in the state of Georgia. She and her three siblings grew up surrounded by animals, including chickens, horses, cows, cats, and the occasional reptile. Both of her parents were local public special education teachers for more than three decades, and she later followed in their footsteps to become an elementary teacher. She later followed her parents' passion for education and taught 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades in both rural and urban school districts across her home state.

Mann grew up in a small rural town with about a thousand residents at the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains in Southern Virginia. While the town was never booming, it was a site of industry until the early 1990s when textiles moved overseas. She watched as jobs left in steady succession and companies boarded up their factories, shops, and storefronts. Her parents struggled to find and keep jobs, and her childhood was marked by economic struggle and uncertainty. She left her small town in pursuit of a college education and became a high school English teacher, where she spent the next thirteen years teaching newcomer immigrant- and refugee-background students in the English literature classroom and an elementary ESL teacher. She later obtained her PhD in Teacher Education and Learning Sciences. These experiences with rural and small-town communities and our child and adult experiences in education shaped how we analyzed and interpreted the data from this study.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative research study that used one school district as its focal case (Yin, 2017). We examined four schools in four different school buildings within a rural district with a significant and growing ML student population. We used purposive and convenience sampling for site and participant selection. The study began when we were invited by the district's mid-level school administrators working in ESL and dual language immersion (DLI) programs to assist them in better understanding their family engagement practices. We subsequently met with the district's Assistant Superintendent for Student Services, who oversaw family engagement district-wide and asked for the same research support. Thus, we designed the study and generated research questions alongside district-level and school-level administrators and personnel, who provided us access to school sites, personnel to interview,

and families. We focused on four schools (two elementary, one middle, and one high school) with significant and growing numbers of ML students per the district's suggestions. We then approached each school's principal for their participation in interviews and to request suggestions for educators who worked with families directly and at family engagement events.

Context of the Study

Hillcrest County (pseudonym) has a population of more than 100,000 residents, but the county covers a vast land area that exceeds more than 500 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The rural county is centrally located between two more populous regions, with approximately a 45-minute commute to either urban location. The local poverty rate of 16% is slightly higher than the state's reported rate of 13.7%. Hillcrest County comprises numerous small towns with populations of two to four thousand people that are located among more rural areas. Each town consists of small businesses and local restaurants, but there are also strong connections to agriculture throughout the county. Nearly 600 farms account for approximately 100,000 acres in the county, producing crops, livestock, and poultry (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2022). The leading reported occupation is construction work, and women take up careers in education or administrative support staff (Data USA, 2022). Because of the rural nature of the county, the average travel time to work is more than 30 minutes, and many people in the work field drive to further urban areas daily for their jobs. There is little public transportation, so residents require access to vehicles to reach places such as medical facilities and grocery stores.

When crossing the line into Hillcrest County, the rurality of the area becomes quickly apparent. Tucked between large fields of agriculture and residents' homes are quaint towns with local businesses, small parks, and community spaces. The county has more than 100,000 acres of farmland that produce tobacco, sweet potatoes, soybeans, wheat, cotton, and livestock. The nearly 30 local schools are prominent buildings in the community, large and mostly made of red brick. When entering schools, visitors are warmly greeted by friendly faces. While welcoming, the schools are busy places with the movement and sound expected to accompany busy students and teachers. Hillcrest County serves a diverse population of students. Of the 20,000 children in the district, 42% identify as White, 24% as Black, and 24% as Hispanic. All but two of the schools in the county are designated as Title 1 programs and receive additional federal funding based on students' free and reduced lunch status.

Data Collection and Analysis

We began our study by obtaining university IRB approvals and school district permissions. We then organized a series of interviews and observations with educators in four different schools. We aimed to collect rich data surrounding existing ML family engagement practices and to learn what was already occurring in the district. Importantly, the district offered both ESL and DLI programs, and the ML students participated in those programs. We expected that family engagement for MLs enrolled in ESL programs, where English was emphasized, would differ from those in DLI programs, where English and Spanish were used, so we marked the program model in our notes.

Our data collection methods included on-site observations and field notes at five ML family engagement events; ten audio-recorded interviews with principals, directors, bilingual family liaisons, school counselors, teachers, and families; and archival data analysis that included pictures taken at events, website analysis, and material artifacts gathered at schools and events. We took copious field notes at each observation or interview event we attended and used an observation protocol for family engagement events. The protocol captured the date, time, participants, languages used, a sketch of the venue, and family interactions with educators and each other. We noted how language and culture were addressed at the event, how the families interacted, and if or how families appeared to understand.

Family engagement events lasted between 90 and 140 minutes. Between 10 and 20 families attended each event, which took place in school gymnasiums, cafeterias, and classrooms in the district. At each event, we drew a sketch diagram of the room's layout, where families sat, where and what the educators presented, and the material artifacts that were available in English or Spanish. We noted that, like the school demographic data, the majority of families were Spanish speakers from countries across Central and South America, as well as Mexico. We noted that about 95% of the families spoke Spanish during the events; however, at one event, there was an immigrant Ukrainian family and an Asian-Pacific Islander family. At each family engagement event, information was provided to families first in English, followed by sequential interpretation in Spanish by a bilingual paraeducator, teacher, or family liaison staff member. We did not obtain data on family home literacy levels, nor did we observe home literacy practices in the context of this study.

At the family engagement events, we took still photographs to document the event and material artifacts used or handed out to families. At each event, we were greeted warmly by the teacher, director, or principal, who knew in advance that we were coming, and we were

often publicly recognized for being present at the event. Families knew who we were and the purpose of our visit at each event.

Table 1. Data Collected

Data Source	Number
observations of family engagement events	5
semi-structured interviews (individual or pairs) audio recorded	10 total
bilingual family liaisons	2 (middle and high school)
principals	1 (middle school)
school counselors	3 (middle and high school)
directors	2 (elementary school)
teachers	1 (elementary school)
parents	2 (elementary school)
school website analysis	5 (2 elementary, 1 middle, 1 high school, district main page)
images	30 unduplicated pictures taken at family engagement events
material artifacts	Additional materials (e.g., WIDA family brochure in Spanish and English, family literacy night questions for books, maps, PTA brochures, Mexican Lotería)

For interview data, we conducted seven audio-recorded single or paired interviews that captured 10 different roles of participants. Each semi-structured interview lasted about one hour, with family interviews lasting two hours. Interviews with families were conducted and transcribed in Spanish and checked for translation accuracy by Coady. The total number of audio-recorded and transcribed interviews was 10. The interviews followed a similar protocol for the participants. We asked open-ended questions, such as “Tell me your experience working with ML students,” or “What are your perceived challenges, struggles, and positive experiences

with ML family engagement." We also asked for their insight into steps they believed could be taken to improve ML family engagement across the district.

At the end of the school year, we conducted an analysis of four schools' websites (two elementary, one middle, and one high school) with a lens of "access." That is, we asked in what ways could print-literate non-English speaking ML families use the websites. The rationale for the website analysis was based on our work with school districts' increasing reliability on the use of digital tools to convey critical information to families, such as the school calendar, lunch menus, bus and transportation services, and online school registration. At the same time, we recognized in our data that many ML families did not have access to consistent internet and technology or were not print or digital-print literate. Thus, we aimed to examine the degree to which the websites were accessible in languages used by print-literate families and, if so, how accessible these translation options were. Table 1 displays the data collected.

Table 2. Interviewees and Roles

Participant	Role
Marta	Immigrant mother and teacher; 2 elementary school boys
Miguel	Immigrant father of 2 elementary school boys
Mr. Sousa	High school bilingual family liaison
Ms. Barrett	Middle and high school counselor
Ms. Cabrera	Elementary School Principal
Ms. Chatham	Elementary school ESL Director
Ms. Harvey	High school student success counselor
Ms. Kim	Middle school counselor (grade 6)
Ms. Sally	Middle school ESL teacher
Ms. Williams	Special Programs Director K-12
Nancy	Immigrant mother of 2 elementary school girls
Rosa	Middle school bilingual family liaison and former school custodian

All of the data were cleaned (transcripts were checked for accuracy; images were referenced for location and time) and uploaded into Atlas.ti software for analysis. Atlas.ti is a data software tool that assists in qualitative data organization and analysis. We used image locations and data sources as codable text. Once data were organized, we individually open-coded the data (Saldaña, 2015), identifying 126 distinct codes. We met over a two-month period to share our codes, discuss insights into the data, and consider emerging findings.

Some of the unique, small codes were collapsed into bigger categories. For instance, one code, "rural distance," referred only to one data source. We collapsed that code into a category titled "distance." We discussed the meanings of these codes to build trustworthiness in the data. We then identified major themes across the various data sources. Our analysis resulted in four major themes based on categories. Those included Rural Familism and Family Engagement, Ambiguity but Strength of Rural School Community Unity, Issues Related to Rural Resources, and Rural Ingenuity: Imperfect Solutions. We discuss our findings below.

RESULTS

This study investigated how one school district was striving to support ML families and students in their under-resourced rural context. Through our analysis of the data, four themes emerged: (a) rural familism in family engagement; (b) strengths and ambiguities of rural staff members; (c) limitations in rural resources; and (d) rural ingenuity with imperfect solutions. We describe each of these below.

Rural Familism in Family Engagement

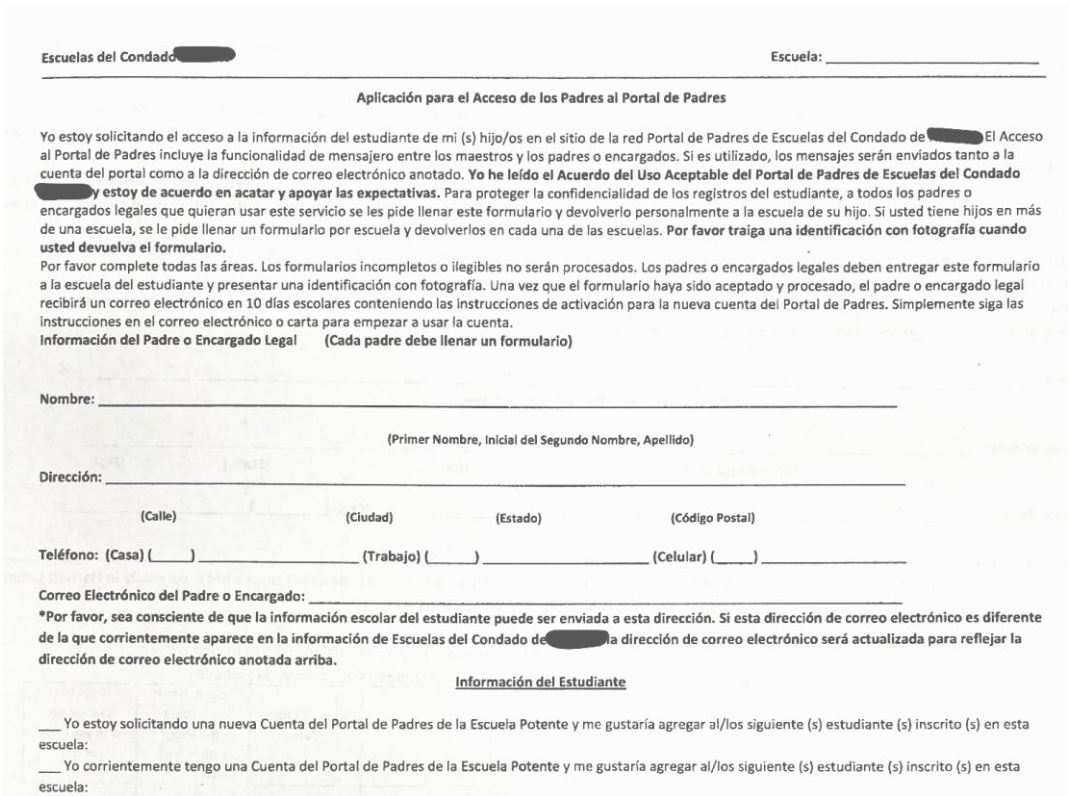
Rural familism in family engagement in this study refers to comprehensive support and services that rural ML families needed that went beyond simple school-home communication practices. Across the data, there was a misalignment between the schools' ideas for family engagement and outreach efforts and what families said they needed. This misalignment became evident in both interviews with educators and families and in observations of family engagement events. Not surprisingly, schools concentrated on students' academic success, pursuing family engagement avenues to encourage parents to support this endeavor. Families were often told that they were responsible for literacy development in the home by reinforcing book reading.

During our observations, facilitators (teachers and staff) emphasized families' need to check their child's grades through PowerSchool, the district's Student Information System platform, involvement in the Parent Teacher Organization, and build home literacy practices. We noted through interviews with families that they wanted to be involved in their children's academic experience; however, they stated that they simply did not know enough about how the system worked and felt limited in their ability to help their child because they did not speak English. For instance, Nancy, a parent who emigrated from Mexico about 10 years prior, stated, "A mí me gusta mucho eso, meterme en eso, ayudar. Quiero saber como funciona el sistema para pedir." [I like that very much, to get involved in this, to help. I want to know how the

system functions to be able to ask [for resources for families and children]] (Nancy, interview, 3/17/23).

The basic need to understand how schools worked was evident in the evening family engagement nights. For instance, one family engagement event that took place about midway through the school year aimed to provide parents with information and access to the district's Parent Portal system. Thirty-one people, including 16 parents or family members and 15 children of various ages, attended the ninety-minute event. Families were seated at long cafeteria tables, and two educators stood at the front of the room in front of a large projector screen. Families were given materials and participated in a storybook read-along in Spanish, using the book *Too Many Tamales* (Soto, 1992). At the end of the event, educators handed out a three-page translated (Spanish) Application for Parental Access to the Parent Portal (see Figure 1). Parents were requested to complete, sign, and return the form to the school the following week and then were reminded to bring their identification along with the completed form to gain access to the Parent Portal. We noted parents' responses: they remained silent and appeared confused about what to do next. Most folded the information sheet and tucked it into their pocket or bags without reading it. We documented assumptions that parents had access to computers and Wi-Fi and knew about Parent Portal.

Figure 1. Parent Portal Sign Up Sheet



Escuelas del Condado [redacted] Escuela: _____

Aplicación para el Acceso de los Padres al Portal de Padres

Yo estoy solicitando el acceso a la información del estudiante de mi (s) hijo/os en el sitio de la red Portal de Padres de Escuelas del Condado de [redacted] El Acceso al Portal de Padres incluye la funcionalidad de mensajero entre los maestros y los padres o encargados. Si es utilizado, los mensajes serán enviados tanto a la cuenta del portal como a la dirección de correo electrónico anotado. **Yo he leído el Acuerdo del Uso Aceptable del Portal de Padres de Escuelas del Condado [redacted] y estoy de acuerdo en acatar y apoyar las expectativas.** Para proteger la confidencialidad de los registros del estudiante, a todos los padres o encargados legales que quieran usar este servicio se les pide llenar este formulario y devolverlo personalmente a la escuela de su hijo. Si usted tiene hijos en más de una escuela, se le pide llenar un formulario por escuela y devolverlos en cada una de las escuelas. **Por favor traiga una identificación con fotografía cuando usted devuelva el formulario.**

Por favor complete todas las áreas. Los formularios incompletos o ilegibles no serán procesados. Los padres o encargados legales deben entregar este formulario a la escuela del estudiante y presentar una identificación con fotografía. Una vez que el formulario haya sido aceptado y procesado, el padre o encargado legal recibirá un correo electrónico en 10 días escolares conteniendo las instrucciones de activación para la nueva cuenta del Portal de Padres. Simplemente siga las instrucciones en el correo electrónico o carta para empezar a usar la cuenta.

Información del Padre o Encargado Legal (Cada padre debe llenar un formulario)

Nombre: _____

(Primer Nombre, Inicial del Segundo Nombre, Apellido)

Dirección: _____

(Calle) (Ciudad) (Estado) (Código Postal)

Teléfono: (Casa) (____) _____ (Trabajo) (____) _____ (Celular) (____) _____

Correo Electrónico del Padre o Encargado: _____

*Por favor, sea consciente de que la información escolar del estudiante puede ser enviada a esta dirección. Si esta dirección de correo electrónico es diferente de la que corrientemente aparece en la información de Escuelas del Condado de [redacted] la dirección de correo electrónico será actualizada para reflejar la dirección de correo electrónico anotada arriba.

Información del Estudiante

___ Yo estoy solicitando una nueva Cuenta del Portal de Padres de la Escuela Potente y me gustaría agregar al/los siguiente (s) estudiante (s) inscrito (s) en esta escuela:

___ Yo corrientemente tengo una Cuenta del Portal de Padres de la Escuela Potente y me gustaría agregar al/los siguiente (s) estudiante (s) inscrito (s) en esta escuela:

[Translation of Figure 1]

Application for Parent Access to the Parent Portal

I am requesting access to my child's school information on the Parent Portal network from X County Schools. Access to the Parent Portal includes a messaging service between teachers and parents or caregivers. If used, messages will be sent via the portal account to the email account noted. I have read the Parent Portal of X County User Agreement, and I adhere to and support the expectations. To protect student confidentiality data, all parents or legal guardians that wish to use this service must complete this form and return it personally to their child's school. If you have children in more than one school, complete the form and return one to each of the schools. Please bring a photo identification when you return the form.

Please complete all areas. Incomplete or illegible forms will not be processed. Parents or legal guardians should return this form to the child's school with a photo identification. Once the form has been accepted and processed, the parent or legal guardian will receive an email in 10 school days with instructions to activate the new account in the Parent Portal. Simply sign the legal parent or guardian information (Each parent should complete one form).

Parent or Legal Guardian Information (Each parent must fill out a form.)

Name: _____
(first name, middle name initial, last name)

Address: _____
(street, city, state, zip code)

Telephone: _____ (house), _____ (work), _____ (cell)

Email address of parent or caregiver: _____

*Please note that the child's school information may be sent to this address. If this electronic email address is different from the current one on the X County Schools, the email used will be the one noted above.

Student Information

___ I request a new Parent Portal account from the school, and I would like to register the following student(s) in this school:

___ I currently have a Parent Portal account, and I would like to register the following student(s) in this school:

Educators did not make explicit what the PowerSchool platform was, how it worked, and why it was important for families to access. There was no connection to how this information could be used to guide family conversations and expectations about school. We further noted the vulnerability of potentially undocumented parents to complete a form and bring a picture ID to access their student's grades. Rather than providing parents with hands-on materials such as a computer and modeling how to use Parent Portal, which would be family-centered engagement activities, the event was a one-way dialogue that exacerbated the equity gap in family engagement.

Despite the extensive effort of both the educators and the families we met, participants described the struggle that ML families faced when navigating daily school routines and seeking to support their children's academic learning. For example, a secondary-level family liaison, Mr. Sousa noted:

> They [the ML parents] do desire for their students to continue and to be able to graduate. But, you know, a lot of times they feel like they don't necessarily know how to do that. (Mr. Sousa, interview, 12/14/22)

Rosa, a former school custodian who became a bilingual family engagement specialist, played a prominent role in helping elementary ML students' parents navigate the invisible rules of the U.S. school system. She described how parents regularly requested her guidance when seeking information about student behavior and bullying, district bus information, and lunch meals. As parents and family members needed assistance navigating the procedures for communicating with teachers and requesting meetings with the school, Rosa's role became increasingly important.

In addition to parents needing support navigating school practices, interview data showed that a broader family engagement lens was required to address parents' needs beyond their students' academic success. Ms. Harvey, a high school student success counselor, was particularly keen on how families' needs were narrowly conceptualized by schools. She advocated for expanding beyond an academic-only lens:

> I think sometimes when I'm meeting, or even just communicating with teachers in the building, that sometimes they forget that these are families that they're working with, and not just the numbers or the... the grades and the test results. That sometimes, since we are all in this community, gets missed in the need to perform or to have your standards. (Ms. Harvey, interview, 12/14/22)

The district acknowledged on its websites and at family engagement events that ML families might need additional resources, but this was primarily limited to their need for translation services. In other words, at the district level, 'extra support' for ML families was equated with the translation of documents and interpretation at school events. The schools and staff members realized the importance of communicating in the families' language of choice, but the focus on translation services minimized the realities and expansive needs that rural ML families had. Mr. Sousa, a secondary bilingual family liaison, shared his perspective on the narrow interpretation of translation services for family engagement:

> And you know, when we are talking about family engagement, we have to think about building relationships with the families, then, for me being an interpreter or being a translator, is just a tool.... is one tool that I can use to engage families. (Mr. Sousa, interview, 12/14/22)

Rosa also acknowledged that families needed more than what schools offered, stating:

> They asked me for food and clothes. Well, for December, we had a family at the last minute. I say last minute because that was three days before we got the [winter holiday] break. And asking for toys and I mean for Christmas presents. And well, I work with the family engagement department to see if they have some, because in my department we don't. (Rosa, interview, 1/6/23)

Ultimately, the data underscored the need for schools to reconceptualize family engagement from traditional activities to practices that met the needs of rural ML families. This meant beginning with trust-building events and providing services to assist families based on what they needed rather than what the school thought they needed, for instance, to access the Parent Portal. Mr. Sousa recounted one example of how this could be done when he sent a sympathy card from the school to a family after he learned that a child's mother was recovering from a recent surgery. He went on to state that even small, thoughtful actions could have a significant impact when striving to build relationships for families. According to Ms. Barrett, growing these family-school relationships included acknowledging "the cultural aspects of what was taking place in the family" (Ms. Barrett, interview, 12/15/22). She continued that the schools placed more emphasis on academics than "the community part" of relationships. Without that, she stated, trust could not be gained with families to get toward family engagement.

Strengths and Ambiguities of Rural Staff Members

The data revealed how necessary and exceptional the multilingual support staff members were for progressively building connections between the schools and the families they served. These key individuals played key roles and had extensive insight into families' needs, usually because of their own diverse backgrounds as Latinos and/or Spanish speakers. These employees acknowledged the vital nature of their rural school roles while communicating the importance of hiring the proper personnel to serve the community and school district. They accentuated the need for additional family engagement staff members who truly understood the needs of ML families' lived experiences and valued the strength and rural resourcefulness of the community. Rosa, for instance, acknowledged the necessity for understanding district staff members in her interview by saying:

> But if he [an employee] doesn't... um suffer, I can say suffer, right? They didn't suffer during their…. the life, yes. [If they haven't suffered] they are not going to understand the family. You had to be there to understand that. (Rosa, interview, 1/6/23)

As an immigrant from Central America, Rosa empathized with the hardships families experienced when moving to a new country where the language and culture were foreign. She used personal experiences and her asset lens of the community to connect with families that needed additional support to adapt to the norms of the United States and the education system. For instance, Rosa stated:

> Because they feel when I... I have a family from Honduras. I tell them, 'Oh, I'm from El Salvador. We have almost the same culture.' So, they feel like oh, you'll understand. (Rosa, interview, 1/6/23)

Rosa's cultural and linguistic expertise and knowledge of the families she worked with made her an asset to the school community. She understood that families felt more comfortable when interactions with the school district were compassionate and empathetic and addressed their specific concerns. Her ability to provide this understanding and kindness made her invaluable in cultivating a sense of rural school community unity.

Despite these support staff members' expansive knowledge and understanding of families and the community, the data also showed that the family liaison staff members faced assumptions about their roles, making their jobs more difficult. The participants stated that liaison and family engagement staff roles were too ambiguous, which allowed administrators and teachers to overlook their background knowledge and language and culture skills. Interview data illuminated how these staff members were entrusted with supporting ML l families and had extensive job tasks, creating a workload that felt tiring and unrealistic to them. As a result, staff members asked for explicit guidance on their job tasks because they regularly moved from task to task and from school to school. This ambiguity, combined with the vast rural geography, left support staff members symbolically putting out fires across the district but unable to efficiently address the root of the problems. In other words, rurality was a complicating factor that made the work of the support staff ever more complex.

As a second sign of ambiguity, the other school district employees lacked awareness of the job expectations and titles of the support staff. This lack of clarity allowed other employees to make excessive requests for assistance, many of which were beyond a reasonable scope of work, further creating an impossibly broad magnitude of additional tasks for these employees. Rosa's discussions about her job roles illuminated this vagueness when she described being requested to assist and calm Spanish-speaking students during behavior crises until a counselor could resume responsibility for the situation. As a former school custodian, she simply lacked the professional training to attend to this level of intervention. These requests left the bilingual liaisons unable to be in their offices during regular business hours. As they put out fires, they expressed concern that parents were unable to contact them because they were engaged in other things (reactive rather than proactive) and traveling far distances between rural schools. Since the district had a small bilingual staff, they were required to serve multiple schools and families, further exacerbating their already difficult jobs.

Mr. Sousa was concerned that administrators did not understand the nature of his work, including the need to spend time with parents and families to build trust and support them. One administrator questioned him after a parent meeting, inquiring about the time he spent with a student's mother. He recounted that:

> …three or four days later, the assistant principal came to me and told me, 'Hi, Mr. S, I saw you talking to the lady that was in the meeting for almost an hour. I saw you through the camera.' And then I said yes. I was doing my work. (Mr. Sousa, interview, 12/14/22)

The administrator further questioned whether discussing the mother's concerns about her son's progress for an hour outside the scheduled meeting could be considered 'work.' Mr. Sousa defended his decision to spend time with the parents by acknowledging that genuine family engagement must venture beyond "just saying okay, hello and goodbye." School staff seemed to confirm the liaisons' concerns that they were seen only as translators by coworkers, despite their official job titles and crucial role in engaging families. In one interview, the participant stated:

> For instance, some weeks ago, a teacher came to my office and said, 'You are the translator, you are the interpreter, I need your help, because I had an incident in my classroom. And then I need you to call this family.' I just looked at her, and I said, No, I'm not an interpreter here. I'm not a translator here. I am the family engagement specialist. (Mr. Sousa, interview, 12/14/22)

Furthermore, there was a division between the district-level office of student services, which had a family engagement department, and the work of some of the liaisons who were designed to support the ML students. The liaisons had limited access to student paperwork unless they were physically present in a meeting. They also lacked social status in the district, earned low wages, and received no professional development. State demographic data indicated that the number of identified ML learners was approximately half the actual number of families who spoke a language other than English in the home (NC DPI, 2023). Thus, the need for outreach, interpretation, and culturally-responsive family engagement was likely much more widespread than the schools realized. For instance, even when a student mastered English and exited an ML program, the family likely still needed support and interpretation to engage in their child's schooling. It was unclear if the parents knew where to get assistance after their child exited the ML program and who provided those services to families.

Despite the ambiguity of their job tasks and the need to be fully acknowledged as assets to schools and families, the family engagement staff members collectively possessed a wealth of experience and knowledge about the families they served, knowledge that the district needed

to tap into to the fullest extent possible. They had personal insights into the family's experiences, used their own experiences to guide their work and connect with families, and served as a valuable connection between the families and the school system, thus reinforcing community unity. Through their roles, these staff members displayed resourcefulness and ingenuity as they fostered connections with multilingual families. Thus, they embodied and *became* the rural cultural wealth for the families who needed it.

Rural Resources for ML Families

Participants in this study expressed the need for more resources in their rural community, specifically for ML families. These requests were not necessarily services that the school could provide but more nuanced and immediate needs from the community to support families beyond their child's education. In interviews, families and educators identified that families needed various supports, including dental and orthodontic care, childcare, eye and medical care, and immigration resources. Families repeatedly asked for ESL classes, feeling frustrated that the local community college offered some ESL classes but during times in the day when most families worked.

During one interview, Rosa described a family's request for an orthodontist after recently immigrating from Venezuela. While the children already had braces, there was no local orthodontist, and the cost of obtaining orthodontic care was beyond the family's reach. A second rural resource requested for ML families was bilingual mental health care. Both families and school administrators underscored that newcomer ML students experienced significant trauma in coming to the state without having access to bilingual mental health services. One elementary school principal noted that "for the Hispanic population like immigrants, it is so hard to find some resources for them, for mental health or counseling. I mean, we don't have too much in this area" (Ms. Barrett, interview, 12/15/23). The counselors in our interviews were also concerned about students' mental health and outside resources, particularly in light of current U.S. immigration policies that were a persistent source of fear of family separation. The counselors recounted a recent rise in self-harm incidents and high-risk behaviors among female ML students due to bullying and self-esteem issues among adolescents.

Our findings underscore how the nature of rural communities limited ML families' access to resources, even when resources were available. Because of the county's geographical size, driving distance was central in our interviews with participants when discussing resource access. In a county with inadequate public transportation, distant locations inhibited families'

access to specific aid. Access to mental health resources in families' home languages was non-existent in the community, and other community services were located in the main county seat, which was far from the schools and communities where our participating ML families lived. This distance also influenced the district support employees, who were required to drive nearly an hour between the schools and families they served. One counselor, Ms. Harvey (interview, 12/14/22), described this as "very, very broad. I mean, from one end of the county to the other, it is not just a hop, skip, and a jump, you know, we're talking about an hour across to get out there." This study found that the intersection of rurality and language had an exponential negative effect on families. For example, driving distance was compounded by the need for translation services in order to access healthcare or mental health services, even if they were available. Rosa acknowledged that talking to a mental health professional could be difficult for any child. Still, when the resource was not in the language and cultural background of the family, there was an additional barrier to getting help.

The schools and support staff tried to remedy the need for outside resources by creating lists of services readily available for families with specific requests. They knew that these rural resources were essential for students' academic success. For example, one school counselor and student success coach, Ms. Harvey, said:

> And we try to, you know, do our best to see what we can do to support and assist students with whatever circumstances that they are dealing with that is, you know, creating some type of barrier to their being unable to come to school, to them staying in school, to them being successful academically, you know, what, what kind of resources can we offer? And what kind of support can we be to help those students who have struggled in those areas? (Ms. Harvey, interview, 12/14/22)

As the schools aimed to address these barriers, staff members were tasked with creating a reference list of bilingual resources for ML families. The staff knew these resources were necessary, but making these lists was extremely time-consuming and outside their general work assignment. Moreover, the resources in languages families knew were irregular. A bilingual healthcare professional might only work a few days each week and at varying times. Thus, rural ML families struggled to navigate the assistance they needed. As a parent herself, Rosa recounted her personal experience when lacking knowledge of available resources and what she and her children needed to do to adapt:

> So, like, as a mom, I told them you are going to the school, you are going to do whatever you have to do. Don't come and ask me because I didn't know anything about it so that they [my children] do that. And so for resources, at the moment, we didn't have anything. So, I had to look for the resources I needed at the moment. (Rosa, interview, 1/6/23)

Rural resource access was compounded by feelings of fear due to complex U.S. immigration policies and threats of deportation. Nancy, the bilingual family liaison, and Magdalena, a bilingual parent with two daughters, discussed the complications of obtaining a state driver's license and recognized that other members of the immigrant community experienced these issues. In rural communities with limited public transportation, a driver's license was essential to work, access food and healthcare, and attend religious and community events. Nancy noted that obtaining information in the rural community was also difficult. She suggested that schools could provide more information directly:

> Pues que pongan los folletos nos ayudaría mucho más información… Por ejemplo, que aunque no tengan papeles pero que tengan sus hijos nacidos aquí, se pueden aplicar para las estampillas, pueden aplicar para el WIC para los infantes. La leche está carísima. (Nancy, interview, 3/17/23)
>
> Well, if they [schools] put up the brochures, more information would help us a lot… For example, even if they don't have papers but have their children born here, they can apply for stamps, they can apply for WIC for infants. Milk is very expensive.

Recent financial concerns, such as the cost of food and housing, significantly impacted the ML families in this rural community. The COVID-19 pandemic generated new issues for schools. During the pandemic, for example, teenage children could access jobs they otherwise could not during regular school hours. Specifically, during COVID-19, minors could fill the extensive construction jobs available in the community with their newly available time not occupied by physically attending school. Parents expressed to the family engagement personnel that school was important, but the children insisted on working and making money. Although they wanted their children to return to school, the children were reluctant to do so because they felt they were easing their parents' financial burdens by contributing to the household funds. In sum, rural resources for ML families were difficult to access due to issues related to rurality and language and cultural differences. Unlike their urban and suburban counterparts, rural schools face extensive limitations in assisting rural ML students and families, including distance, financial resources, highly prepared educators and staff, and social and medical service networks for families.

Rural Ingenuity with Imperfect Solutions

Educators generated insightful and informed ideas to reach and support ML families. Those included food distribution for weekends, technology for communication and conveying information, and culturally sensitive materials. In many ways, the rural school district, knowing its own rural challenges, intentionally strived to implement programs and structures to support

their ML families. Collectively, educators harnessed rural ingenuity in seeking solutions when resources were not abundant. However, findings highlighted that most of these solutions came with caveats, making them 'imperfect solutions' for engaging families. For example, some schools provided bagged weekend meals for students, but the staff acknowledged that low-income families needed more than one bag of food on the weekends, especially if they had several children. In other words, a solution to food security was to provide weekend food. However, it was not enough to meet families' needs when additional food provided during the COVID-19 pandemic was no longer available. These gaps remained and were exacerbated for families who had children too young to attend public school.

Similarly, issues were identified with translating practices and how the schools engaged and communicated with ML families. Many of these communication avenues did not impact families to the full extent that schools presumed was happening. Ms. Williams illuminated one such example when discussing an interaction with an ML parent of a high school student:

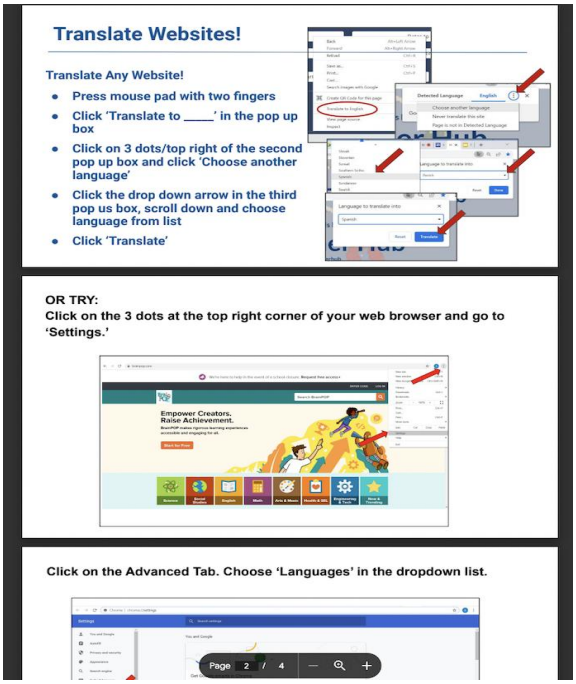
> Every Sunday night, our principal sends a message that comes through your phone, email. And I asked him, 'Are you getting those messages in Spanish?' And he said, No. And I know we have something…. you can…. I don't know what it's called. But you can, you can set it up so that the message goes out in English and in Spanish, but it doesn't look like it's being used right now. (Ms. Kim, interview, 12/14/22)

Further, while schools sent some documents home in Spanish and English for ML families, the counselors estimated that about half of the families they worked with were not print literate in either English or Spanish. So, not only was the district unable to meet federal requirements that all school documents be sent home in languages that families use, but print literacy was also an issue that few educators in our study considered. Rosa noted that:

> Now sometimes schools pass [documents] in Spanish and I give it to them but then they can't read it and they told me, 'oh, the school gave me a paper in Spanish, but I never go to school'. So I say, okay, send me a picture and I'll tell you what it says. (Rosa, interview, 1/6/23)

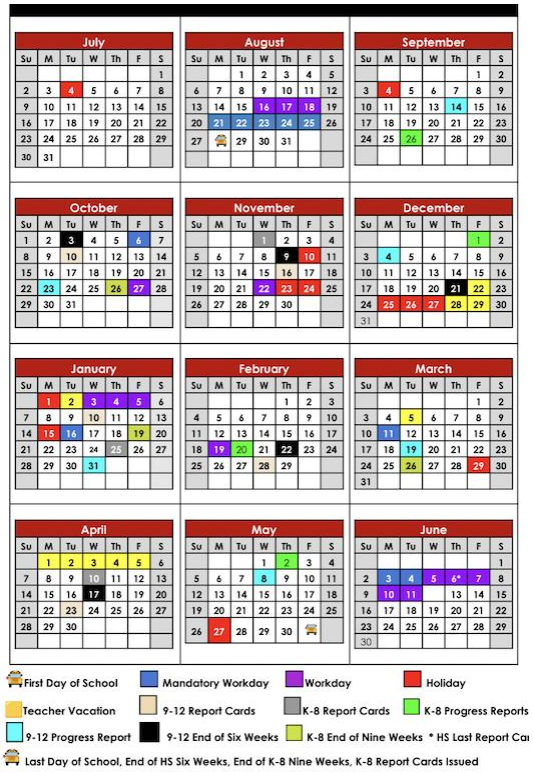
The various school websites were another example of the imperfect solutions to rural ML issues. The district website was translatable only if families knew how to use the Google Translate feature at the top of the webpage and understood that to translate it to Spanish, they needed to identify "S" rather than "e" for español. The instructions for translating the sites were both complex and in English. Figure 2 is one example of a school's instructions for parents to translate the website.

Figure 2. District Website Translation Instructions



In addition, the Google feature did not translate embedded documents on the district and school websites, such as the school calendar and lunch menus, as depicted in Figure 3. Thus, parents could not access essential school information.

Figure 3. School District Calendar



Numerous other "imperfect" examples highlighted a need for more clarity on available resources and how these solutions were intended to support rural ML families. Technology was a critical factor and was proposed as a solution for building relationships between staff members and ML families. When discussing translation services and ML family communication, a district staff member stated:

> There's another app called Talking Points. Is it Talking Points? Have you heard of that?... [I think] a teacher can send a text in English and that parent can get it in their language?

Our data included several novel uses of technology that held the potential to be helpful. However, these were not available to parents in their language and were not solutions for non-print literate families. One included the "Remind" communication app. Another was the "Chipmunk" app for tracking students' buses. The district also had its own district-wide app and an ESL page for ML families on the website. During an end-of-year family engagement event, educators attempted to demonstrate the ESL webpage to parents so that they could access school information. While this activity would have been most useful at the beginning of the school year, the educators themselves had trouble loading the page to demonstrate it to a cafeteria full of ML parents. They described the app as "really glitchy." While many staff members leaned on technology in positive ways, such broad usage of communication channels was overwhelming for ML families, who had low print literacy and technology skills. There was an obvious need to streamline and consolidate culturally and linguistically responsive communication resources for rural ML families.

Other family engagement events reinforced the theme of imperfect solutions. For instance, one family engagement event was scheduled at 6:00 PM during a mealtime, but no snacks or water were provided. The event ran over the scheduled time by 45 minutes, and when one of the researchers went to the restroom, the door was locked, and she found herself helping younger siblings navigate the building in search of access to restroom facilities. While these obstacles seem minor inconveniences to the welcoming nature of the school, these barriers can impact the relationship between parents and the school system.

As there were dedicated (albeit geographically and resource-stretched) bilingual family engagement staff to work and assist with families, findings from this study demonstrated that families did not understand the various roles of school personnel and the work of the staff. Families needed to be made aware of the role of a school counselor or that some support staff could help them navigate school practices and participate in their student's educational journey. During one vignette about interpreting during a parent meeting, Mr. Sousa described how:

> after the meeting, she [a student's mother] said, "Oh, and you are gonna be here every day?" He replied, "Yes, I'm going to be here three days a week, or you can reach me and me in my office… tomorrow. I can help you." The mother responded, "Oh, now I know. Because I've been asking myself what to do about anything related to the school." (Mr. Sousa, interview, 12/14/22)

Continuing, he noted that the parents often do not know who to approach at the school or what to ask.

Throughout the study, it became evident that parents were not fully aware of the people or resources in the district who were available to support their inquiries. However, it was enlightening and invaluable when they realized these support and staff members existed. Thus, solutions were thoughtful, but they were 'imperfect' in how they were operationalized by the district and utilized by families.

DISCUSSION

Engagement for rural ML families is complex and multilayered. With changing demographics toward more culturally and linguistically diverse families in rural communities, traditional concepts of 'family' and 'engagement' need to be reconsidered for both newcomer immigrant families and for second or third-generation immigrant families who reside in rural communities but have not historically been represented in community social structures and spaces. One problem is scholarship that continues to refer to many rural communities as 'new destination settings' (Hamann, 2003) with respect to Latino demographics, despite the fact that immigrant, diverse, and Latino families have often resided in those communities for long periods of time. Misconceptions like these exist when educational research fails to capture the history of people who inhabit the land (Greenwood, 2019) and because immigrants and minoritized groups have not been represented in community spaces or power structures (Azano et al., 2025; Hamann, 2003; Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012). Demographic projections for our state indicate that the majority of rural counties will continue to experience an increase in Hispanic migration through 2050 (Carolina Demography, 2023). These trends equate to continued linguistic diversity as families represent a multitude of countries, cultures, and languages.

Findings from our study highlight one rural school district that sought to better understand the nature of ML family engagement and how it could be reconceptualized to support rural ML students and families. We found that at the intersection of rurality and ML education, there are unique challenges but inherent opportunities to reconceptualize this work. Educators can challenge the silence and passive reception of information that ML families too often

experience at ‘engagement events.’ Rather than opening linguistic spaces where families learn from and about each other and collectively describe their needs and proposed solutions to rural issues, family engagement events remain predominantly one-way events, where educators tell parents what they (believe they) need to know. Baquedano-López et al. (2014) describe this as a “trope” whereby schools conceptualize “parents as first teacher” and “parents as learners” and place downward and undue pressure on ML families who are struggling to support their children. In contrast, parents’ experiential, linguistic, and cultural knowledge can be central to developing and implementing family engagement practices.

Challenging those common practices requires that rural schools and educators build from their knowledge of rural strengths to inform their work. For instance, rural resourcefulness is the capacity of rural people to meet and overcome social and contextual adversities. In our study, we found that ML families attempted to figure out how schools worked through informal networks, yet they needed explicit support for their children and requested that educators become more aware of the realities of their lives, such as the need to open schools earlier in the morning. As an example of their resourcefulness, families reached out to bilingual family engagement specialists for non-school-related needs, such as translation, health care services, and mental health support. Schools can align the strength of rural resourcefulness at ML family engagement events by centering families’ conversations around those issues and proactively providing services and information to families in linguistically accessible ways.

Rural ingenuity is a characteristic of the collective community, whereby people leverage everyday knowledge to respond creatively to challenges. In this study, we noted how bilingual staff, for example, worked through informal family, school, and community networks to identify issues within the school district and to find solutions for Latino families. Family engagement specialists also provided some of those supports, but their roles in the district were ambiguous to educational leaders and teachers, and they felt deeply undervalued. In terms of rural familism, where rural communities recreate family-like relationships of support, Latino families in the district demonstrated a different familism (familismo) that was based on their own cultural and linguistic practices. In other words, rural familism as a strength can be further informed by and contextualized for ML families and Latino familismo. ML families’ attendance at events revealed their commitment to their child’s education as an example of collective care. Nancy’s reliance on her neighbor for early morning childcare was another example of this collective care and rural ingenuity to identify solutions to her need for early

morning care. These acts can inform school family engagement events, and the kinds of support that schools can provide to rural ML families as nontraditional forms of "family engagement."

Finally, rural community unity refers to how community members organize and unify for civic engagement and collaboration, particularly in times of need. There was a sense of rural community unity among the educators and a clear, shared sense that the school district needed to do something differently for ML families. The fact that both the district-level administrators and the bilingual/ESL administrators asked for this research to be conducted highlights their need to create stronger support systems for ML families. However, the rural community network remained educator-driven, with ML families at the margins of power and decision-making surrounding their child's education. Examples by Jasis (2019) and the concept of *tequio* can inform how other rural communities can support family- and community-driven school engagement.

Despite these efforts, linguicism remains. English-only communication reproduces an unequal division of power and resources. As rural communities become more linguistically diverse, rural schools must comply with federal guidelines as a *de minimis* response to ML families. Simply providing handout instructions in Spanish for families on how to sign up for the Parent Portal is insufficient when families lack access to technologies or are non-print literate. Websites and school apps that ML families cannot access linguistically illuminate how linguicism plays out in the everyday lives of ML families, particularly those in rural communities where families are unable to physically access schools or services on a regular basis. In other words, rurality exacerbates linguistic discrimination in ways that have not been fully explored or understood as compounded equity issues. Rurality and language generate additional inequities for rural ML families, the same families that are a lifeline for rural community survival.

We advocate for *rural language and cultural knowledge* as an additional dimension of rural cultural wealth that both frames and informs the construct. Language skills, cultural knowledge, ways of being, and relationships among diverse people hold the potential to disrupt social inequities and adversities when those strengths are visible, valued, and prioritized. Alternative, subaltern, Indigenous, and camponês (farmworker) knowledge (Freire, 1970), which remain distant in traditional concepts of family engagement, must be centered in the work of educators. Without this, family engagement will continue to be informed by Western-driven family engagement 'toolkits' that reify existing power inequities and structures and fail to truly meet the needs of ML families.

Greenwood (2019) challenges those of us who hold privilege and power to engage in an ongoing process of reflection, unlearning, and reinhabitation. We are committed to identifying the histories of people who inhabit rural communities and to ask how they are represented in the social systems, structures, and visibly in the linguistic landscapes of the community (Gorter, 2006). Moving into the next decade, there is an urgent need for educators to unlearn traditional family engagement practices, reflect on who those practices aim to serve, and (re)center families' languages, cultures, and ways of being. We reimagine communities that no longer frame rural ML families in deficit narratives. The challenge is not only to build relationships and trust in family-school partnerships and practices but to rehumanize those spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study examined ML family engagement practices in a rural school district in the southeast U.S. with increasing linguistic diversity among its student population. We found that traditional activities used in ML family engagement did not align with the social, linguistic, or cultural needs of families. Educators recognized the mismatch between what families (said they) needed and the kinds of outreach and activities that schools provided. Moreover, bilingual family engagement specialists, who navigated narrow perceptions of their work, felt undervalued for the social and linguistic support that they provided. Reconceptualizing family engagement for rural ML families can draw from rural cultural wealth– ingenuity, unity, and familism–and could inform and re-center family engagement practices for diverse families. Rural family engagement for this and other rural school districts with linguistically diverse and minority families will require a reimagination of engagement to address families' social, physical, and emotional needs and well-being.

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