Shoji, M. (2014). Nice to Meet You? Exploring the Development of Supportive Parent-School Relationships in Low-Income Latino Communities.

Abstract

While the persistent educational disadvantage of U.S.-based Latinos is clear, its underlying mechanisms remain hazy. This study considers one potentially important factor: the dearth of strong family-school connections in predominantly low-income minority communities, where the nation's Latino families disproportionately reside.

Socioeconomic and racial/ethnic differences in family-school ties are well documented, but we know less about how they are generated, particularly when children are young. This dissertation explores the development of family-school connections during early elementary school. Using a multi-method approach, I conduct three complementary analyses using data on more than 2,500 families of first-grade students attending predominantly Latino schools in high immigrant-receiving communities.

First, using multilevel piecewise linear regression and parent questionnaire data, I examine how parent-staff relationships change over the first years of formal schooling. At the start of first grade, I find evidence of ethnic and linguistic disparities in school ties which persist through third grade. The results reveal heterogeneity within the Latino population, suggesting that, for Spanish-dominant parents, feelings of trust and respect toward staff may be insufficient for facilitating many ties to the school.

Second, I explore how supportive parent-staff relationships develop (and fail to develop), drawing on 50 in-depth interviews with parents from 30 Latino families. I find that parents evaluate their school ties through an ongoing process of information-gathering and discernment, conditioned by their prior beliefs, organizational characteristics of the school, and status relations between parents and staff. The findings reveal barriers to strong family-school ties in historically marginalized communities, while also illuminating how individual and organizational efforts can overcome them to establish supportive connections in the school community.

Finally, drawing on a cluster-randomized design, I assess how and for whom a family engagement program impacts parent-staff relationships in these communities. I estimate both intent-to-treat and treatment-on-the-treated effects, finding positive returns for families who fully participate in the program, but little overall impact from simply offering the program in the school community. Moreover, the program may inadvertently exacerbate social inequality, as estimated returns to participation were weakest for Latino families who tend to start out the least socially integrated in the school.