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To cite this article: Cristina Santamaría Graff (2021) Co-investigation and co-education in 'family as faculty' approaches: A repositioning of power, Theory Into Practice, 60:1, 39-50, DOI: [10.1080/00405841.2020.1829380](https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2020.1829380)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2020.1829380>



Published online: 14 Dec 2020.



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## Co-investigation and co-education in ‘family as faculty’ approaches: A repositioning of power

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### ABSTRACT

Family as Faculty (FAF) approaches originate from family-centered healthcare models and have been adapted in special education teacher education programs to positively influence and impact pre-service special education teachers’ dispositional understandings of working and collaborating with parents/families. However, the majority of research centered on these approaches fails to address issues of equity, specifically uneven power relationships between teachers and families. This paper expands upon FAF approaches by integrating conceptual framings linked directly to critical pedagogy, such as co-investigation and co-education, as integral components in addressing power relations between future special education teachers and multiply marginalized families of children with disabilities. Deliberate repositioning of parents/families as co-investigators/co-educators within research and teacher education programs targets uneven power dynamics to further assist future teachers in critical self-reflection of their own power and privilege in relation to the students and families with whom they will work.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) parents of children with disabilities are afforded several rights that include decision-making authority about eligibility determination, educational placement, instruction, and services for their child. The underlying spirit of this special education law is captured in this statement: “Parents and school personnel are encouraged to work together ... ” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, §300.306). Working together, however, is often a complex and difficult process, particularly when parents and school officials are at odds with one another regarding what is best and appropriate for the child/student. Complicating attempts at collaboration is the fact that many parents come to the decision-making table, for example, at their child’s Individualized Educational Planning (IEP) meeting, to discover that many key decisions impacting their child’s learning and educational trajectory have already been discussed among school personnel (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). For context, “parent” is inclusive of a biological parent, a foster parent, a family member or an individual who is the main caregiver of the person with a disability. In this article, “parent” can be substituted, in many cases, for “family member.” In addition, parents may arrive to school meetings with anxiety or on the defensive because of previous negative experiences that taint their overall outlook (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). These feelings may be further exacerbated for parents of Color (Harry, 2008) and emerging multilinguals (Tejero Hughes et al., 2008) whose successful navigation of special

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education systems are thwarted by systemic oppressions manifesting in racial microaggressions (Dávila, 2015) or continuous language and cultural barriers (Baquedano-López et al., 2013) they or their children experience.

Historically, families of children with disabilities have been pushed to the margins in the decision-making processes that affect their children (Ferguson, 2008). Though, by law, they are “members” of IEP and student-centered teams, often they do not feel heard, understood, or validated by other members or educational stakeholders (Leiter & Wyngaarden Krauss, 2004). For clarity, student-centered teams include Individualized Education Planning (IEP), transition, and other school-based teams that are focused on the student with disabilities’ overall well-being. These teams are inclusive of the student’s family members. Moreover, multiply marginalized families, such as Latinx immigrants, frequently are viewed through deficit perspectives when predominately White, non-disabled, monolingual English-speaking teachers attempt to assess the reasons why their child is struggling (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). These assessments are often rooted in dominant Westernized notions of what educational progress and success look like (Walton, 2018). To be clear, in this article, the term *multiply marginalized* means families of Color who have been historically minoritized and who have children with disabilities. These families’ race, ethnicity, nationality, or immigration status is generally viewed as problematic by people or systems that place value on White, Eurocentric dominant values. When disability is added as an additional, intersectional identity marker along with other possible markers connected to language or cultural difference, families experience multiple ways of being marginalized. Thus, these families may be challenged by structural or societal disparities emanating from “difference.”

To counter these deficit-driven assumptions of families, particularly of multiply marginalized families of children with disabilities, this article reconceptualizes what it means for families to be central stakeholders. “Family members as central stakeholders” draws from the understanding of *educational sovereignty* where those who have been multiply marginalized are, instead, recognized as “legitimate knowers and decision-makers of their child’s learning” (see also Baquedano-López in this issue). In Family as Faculty (FAF) approaches, family members — like “faculty” at colleges or universities — have authority and decision-making power in educational spaces, specifically in teacher preparation special education programs. They are central stakeholders who exert expertise and leadership in the formation of future teachers. Specifically, an FAF approach implemented in a Midwest state is highlighted as a model for how parents or family members can be (re)positioned as central stakeholders and leaders. Repositioning, in this context, is different from positioning. Positioning assumes that family members are not already equal partners with other educators in making important decisions for the child/student. Repositioning refers to an acknowledgment of families’ sovereignty and the structural barriers within educational systems that prevent families’ full participation in these systems. Repositioning in FAF is an intentional movement of the *family member* from the periphery to the center in teaching and researching spaces. Repositioning means making a conscious effort to reallocate or redistribute power to address issues of equity to ensure that family members’ voices are heard, listened to, and acted upon to positively impact the well-being of their children.

The FAF approach highlighted in this article expands upon FAF models used in healthcare and teacher education. This approach is unique from existing FAF research

in that it integrates conceptual framings linked directly to critical pedagogy, specifically co-investigation and co-education, in addressing power relations between future special education teachers and multiply marginalized families of children with disabilities. In this article, co-investigation and co-education are described through FAF projects embedded in a special education course on families. Examples of actual events occurring in FAF projects are interwoven throughout the article to demonstrate conceptual understandings related to co-investigation and co-education. To provide context for FAF, an overview of its origins is presented briefly with an emphasis on the ways in which families have been repositioned, to varying degrees, as experts of their children.

## Family as faculty

Though FAF approaches have been used in teacher preparation programs and other educational settings, there has been a limited number of studies centered on Family as Faculty in the past decade (2010 — present). Publications about FAF or family-centered approaches within teacher preparation programs do not explicitly discuss the ways in which families of children with disabilities, particularly multiply marginalized families, can be intentionally located in leadership positions to counter *dominant* power structures in education. Gutierrez (2008) provides an important understanding of multiply marginalized individuals within a White-dominant, Eurocentric system. Applied to students of Color and their families, Gutierrez's term, "non-dominant," refers to identity markers related to race, ethnicity, and language that have been minoritized when compared to White, Eurocentric groups who hold power and dominance socially, economically, and politically. When applied to multiply marginalized families, such as Latinx immigrants of children with disabilities, "non-dominance" becomes a structural tool to ensure families are less visible and prominent in educational spaces where decisions are made that impact their children. Families' silence ensures that traditional power hierarchies remain status quo (Balcazar et al., 2012). These hierarchies are especially important to address considering that the growing number of multiply marginalized students contrasts starkly with current teacher demographics that consist of a dominant-majority White, monolingual English-speaking, middle-class female workforce (The State Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce, 2016). If these hierarchies are not challenged, then we, as a society, will continue to (re)produce practices, policies, and systems inequitable to families who, oftentimes, find themselves on the periphery or outside of educational power structures directly impacting their children (Santamaría Graff & Sherman, 2020). In the next section, a brief overview of FAF in healthcare and teacher education is described to provide context for why new iterations of FAF are needed specifically for centering the voices of multiply marginalized students and their families.

## Healthcare

Family as Faculty (FAF) emerged out of family-centered care in the early- to mid-1990s and is focused on the comprehensive knowledge families of children with disabilities possess about their children's needs and strengths (Johnson et al., 2006). The idea of families as "faculty" originated from programs that centered families' narratives as

‘teachable moments’ for healthcare professionals who wanted to learn from families’ first-hand experiences as a way to better understand how to provide the best, overall care for the child. According to Heller and McKlindon (1996):

The premise of the program was that if families would teach through their personal stories, the prospects for increased empathy, effective communication, tolerance for diversity, and commitment to partnership could be extraordinary. (p. 429)

One of the outcomes of implementing FAF and other family-centered approaches in healthcare was that patients and their family members were seen as key stakeholders in informing the care patients ultimately received (Igel & Lerner, 2016). Traditionally, where physicians had been the sole experts of health, now expertise was negotiated so that patients’ and their families’ knowledge, understandings, and perspectives were viewed as important contributive pieces in providing overall care (Igel & Lerner, 2016; Parent et al., 2016).

### **Education**

In special education teacher preparation programs there is a recognition among teacher educators that future special education teachers must possess and demonstrate multiple skill sets connected to pedagogy, research-based practices, application of or adherence to special education law, and an overall ability to translate knowledge about their students’ needs to teams of individuals, including the child’s parents, in an effective, fair, and clear manner (Brownell et al., 2005; Rosetti et al., 2017). Special education teacher preparation professionals have incorporated different activities within their courses to ensure these skills are honed. However, many programs are often challenged to find ways to ensure pre-service teachers’ communication with families is rooted in respectful, asset-based understandings valuing both the child with disabilities and the family (López, 2017). Traditionally, to teach future teachers about families, course instructors have engaged students in discussions and notetaking regarding the role of families in IEP-, transition-, or other student-centered meetings (Christensen & Hanson, 1987; Elksnin, 1998). Others have used case-based approaches to learn about families from reading about specific, first-hand experiences children and families have had navigating special education systems (Harry et al., 2007; Snyder & McWilliam, 2003). In contrast, Family as Faculty (FAF) approaches aim to have pre-service special education teachers learn directly from parents/family members of children with disabilities who, in essence, are co-teachers of special education teacher preparation courses (Patterson et al., 2009).

One of the earliest adaptations of FAF from the healthcare field to higher education contexts occurred in 1999 through the Florida Partnership for Family Involvement in Education (Harvard Family Research Project, 2000). Through this program, families of children with disabilities guest-lectured and shared their stories for the purpose of integrating insider, family perspectives to inform teacher candidates’ understandings of family involvement. Family-centered lectures provided first-hand accounts of issues families confronted in relation to their child’s educational and academic success. Data from these lectures and other family-centered activities detailed the importance of integrating “the family involvement theme throughout the curricula” (Shartrand et al., 1997, p. 58) while setting the groundwork for “Family as Faculty” as a method for bringing parent voices into teacher education programs.

Outcomes of family-centered studies have pointed to the importance of providing pre-service teachers with ways to link knowledge acquisition with authentic learning opportunities directly connected to families' lived experiences, including experiences of being differently-abled or coming from a nonwhite or non-English-speaking background (Patterson et al., 2009; Williams, 2012). Benefits of using a FAF approach in teacher education programs have included better preparation of pre-service teachers in knowing how to establish collaborative partnerships with parents or families, more confidence in working with children with disabilities, and greater compassion for family members who face significant challenges while navigating educational systems. These outcomes have been measured through rating scales, pre- and post-Belief surveys, focus groups, reflective writing, or journal prompts (Macy & Squires, 2009; Patterson et al., 2009; Williams, 2012).

### **Using family as faculty to reposition power**

In FAF projects, one way to consciously locate families centrally “at the table” is to hear, listen to, and respond with action to what they say and contribute. This intentional relocation means that family members are positioned as leaders in research and teaching contexts. This repositioning is grounded in and aligned with conceptual understandings originating from critical pedagogy: co-investigation and co-education. From these understandings emerge other interrelated ones that will be discussed including dialogical interactions and dialectical tensions. Woven into these understandings are examples from concrete moments experienced through Family as Faculty projects over the past four years (2016 — present). Context for these projects is presented first.

### ***FAF projects in a Midwest state***

Since 2016, I have implemented four iterations of Family as Faculty projects embedded in a special education, teacher preparation course on families at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The university where I work is located within the State's capital city in an urban environment. The majority of students I teach are White, middle-class, able-bodied, monolingual English-speaking females. I have established partnerships with several parent-to-parent organizations, serve as a board member on one and as an educational adviser on another. Through these partnerships, I have successfully recruited over 40 families who have engaged in FAF projects, to varying degrees and amounts. The FAF projects are constantly evolving based on student and family feedback, funding, and accessibility to resources. The projects, rooted in participatory approaches influenced by critical pedagogy, have included: a) parent presentations, b) parent and family member panels, c) student-parent interviews, d) an Inclusion Conference organized by pre-service teachers and parents where over 130 people attended, e) Latinx immigrant workshops where families and pre-service teachers collaborated on family-driven action plans, f) parent-organized and -facilitated classes occurring throughout the semester, g) data collection and analysis by parents, h) co-written pieces with parent-to-parent administrators and with parents involved in the FAF projects, and i) co-presentations with parents and parent-to-parent staff and administrators at local, regional, and national conferences.

I frame the FAF projects in which we, the pre-service teachers, the families, and I are engaged through co-investigation and co-education. I also consider power dynamics, my

own privilege, and the moment-to-moment as well as the long-term interactions I have with all stakeholders as I continue my work to transform educational systems by repositioning families as experts and leaders in the courses I teach. The next sections describe the participatory framing behind and applied practice of FAF.

### **Co-investigation and co-education**

Critical pedagogy, as conceptualized by Freire (2000), is a philosophy of education and a social movement aimed at the emancipation from oppression through critical consciousness (Kincheloe & Steinburg, 1997). Freire's understanding of *conscientização*,

or critical consciousness, is the awakening of individuals to the social injustices weaved into the fabric of their world. It is also the catalyst for them to become intentional in confronting and transforming oppression, which stems from authoritarian tendencies that limit imagination and impede agency, justice and democracy (Darder, 2002).

As contextualized through this article, both co-investigation and co-education are participatory approaches stemming from critical pedagogy that provide structure and guidance for how researchers or educators can work with community stakeholders (e.g., families) in establishing mutually beneficial goals through co-created projects, research, activities, or events. Both rely on dialogical interactions or “dialogics”, which, according to Freire (2000) is “the essence of education as the practice of freedom” (p. 87). In reference to Family as Faculty, the critical engagement of families and educators/researchers in family-centered projects relies upon consistent and honest dialogue through which meaning is co-constructed as a “way” and “process of knowing” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379). The “co” in co-investigation and co-education is dependent upon this dialogue to ensure that all stakeholders in FAF projects, especially families, are valued, seen, and treated as significant contributors who have authority to influence and impact the trajectory of course content and research decisions. Additionally, as I have presented, *dialectical tensions* that occur because of or through dialogical exchanges are also necessary in co-investigation and co-education. These tensions will be explained in the sections that follow as they pertain to a specific synergy occurring when those with different expertise and wisdom share their insights to inform and move toward common, mutually-established goals.

### **Co-Investigators**

Co-investigation, a term introduced by Freire (2000), is grounded in the understanding that those who would normally be objects of the investigation or research are repositioned as “co-investigators” (p. 106). In FAF approaches, families are active “agents of change” (Fals-Borda, 1991, p. 3) rather than passive recipients. In FAF research, pre-service teachers no longer learn *about* parents or families from textbooks or secondhand accounts, they learn *from* parents who are actively involved in research design and inquiry. Concurrently, and similar to Katie Brooks' and colleagues' article in this special issue that centers on Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), educators “work *with*, not for, families to pursue shared lines of inquiry embedded in their everyday lives, experiences, and needs” (p. X). By *learning from* and *working with* families, pre-service teachers and other educators learn to see family members not as objects of research projects, but rather as co-partners whose perspectives are valued, contributive, and necessary.

An example of a parent as a co-investigator is a Nicaraguan, Spanish-speaking parent-advocate of a child with Down Syndrome who met with me several times in the summer of 2018 to discuss and plan the Latinx family-driven workshops that would occur in the fall semester. She was both a co-investigator and co-educator. She brainstormed and co-generated specific items for data collection (a straightforward questionnaire for parents; journal reflections for student, pre-service teachers) and pedagogical activities centered on course topics (real-life case examples for students to analyze that she prepared and facilitated). During the fall semester families' course, this parent provided insightful analysis after she read the data collected from Latinx family members which stated that the instructions for the collaborative action-plans with students were too lengthy and complicated. These action plans, rooted in critical pedagogy, were co-designed with this parent to assist the Latinx parents and the students to collaborate together in spite of language and cultural challenges. Her feedback immediately changed how instructions were written and disseminated during the workshops. Her expertise was heeded and led to positive, more constructive exchanges between the parents and students.

### Co-Educators

Parents are also *co-educators*, a term I am using to distinguish FAF research-related activities from pedagogical ones. Not to be confused with coeducational schooling, the practice of teaching male and female students together in the same school or setting, co-education, grounded in critical pedagogy, is the context within parents own their roles as co-teachers of teacher preparation courses where they co-plan curricular activities and co-instruct college students. As co-educators, parents share their stories and expertise as parents of children with disabilities. Drawing from FAF models, parents are “faculty” who contribute to the formation of future teachers. They also are positioned as leaders who, through their teaching, speak out against and attempt to change oppressive or unfair practices that disproportionately affect their children (Santamaría Graff et al., 2020; Warren-Gordon & Santamaría Graff, 2018).

For example, as a co-educator, an African American mother of a young adult with Autism shared her story of being a Black, single mother of a child with disabilities who was discriminated against at IEP and transitional planning meetings for being perceived as “not knowledgeable.” Through a 2-hour presentation in which she presented her daughter's life story through poignant anecdotes and photos, she conveyed to pre-service teachers the importance of not judging a child by a label to determine what s/he can or cannot do. Students' reflections demonstrated not only a shift in their thinking, but a deeper respect for families, their resilience, and their overall knowledge of their children as evidenced by two students' written journal responses:

- Student 1: “[She] (the parent) mentioned a time when [she] had to fight for certain services for [her] child and when a teacher did not value the input or communication with [her]. Those instances are examples to keep in mind when collaborating with parents and families. They should be respected and valued as a parent who knows what's best for their child.”
- Student 2: “[She] taught me that charts and numbers do not mean that a child is unable to learn simply because their scores are low ... ”

### *Dialogical Interactions and Dialectical Tensions*

The deliberate repositioning of parents as co-investigators and co-educators in FAF projects embedded in teacher preparation programs is especially powerful when multiply marginalized families are central stakeholders in leadership positions. As alluded to, both co-investigation and co-education are reliant upon dialogical interactions among and between all stakeholders. Dialogical interactions, in essence, are a “two-sided act” whereby communication between individuals provides understanding of themselves and the world around them as they navigate who they are in relation to the other (Lähtenmäki, 1998). These interactions, according to Freire (2000), should assume a horizontal orientation between people founded in “love, humility, and faith” (p. 91). A horizontal orientation, versus a vertical, top-down one, implies that all stakeholders are in dialogue together and make decisions equitably, with every voice heard and represented. When families of children with disabilities and, specifically, multiply marginalized families, are invited into a space that has been designed to value and honor their voices, a tangible synergy of respect and trust is co-created (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019).

In an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, where dialogical interactions are occurring between individuals, it is likely that dialectical tensions will also arise. Dialectical tensions are contradictions or oppositions that, if engaged in with an underlying care or consideration for the other person/people, can lead to deeper understandings. These tensions or “competing systems of meaning constituted in communication” (Baxter & Scharp, 2015, p. 1) are highly fruitful if resulting in mutual meaning.

According to Colombian sociologist, Orlando Fals-Borda, who pioneered the southern tradition of Participatory Action Research (PAR), these tensions are important. They are created when 2 types of “agents of change” — external and internal — come together “unified in one sole purpose — that of achieving shared goals of social transformation” (p. 4). Within a research context, external agents of change are generally academic researchers and internal agents are community stakeholders, or, in FAF, family members.

Dialectical tensions are beneficial if different lived experiences and ways of knowing are valued including “academic knowledge” and “popular knowledge and wisdom” (Fals-Borda, 1991, p. 4). In FAF, oftentimes, families’ knowledge and wisdom differ from academic knowledge as families’ expertise comes mainly from hands-on experiences (Warren-Gordon & Santamaría Graff, 2018). For example, in one Latinx immigrant family-driven workshop, I addressed the pre-service teachers (i.e., students) and families about the importance of maintaining consistent communication. As an academic who used e-mail as my most frequent form of communication with colleagues and students, I suggested having students and parents communicate by e-mail. At this suggestion, one of the Latina mothers raised her hand and asked, “Why not use WhatsApp?” I asked what “WhatsApp” was and soon discovered that all the Latinx family members at the workshop communicated using this free text-messaging application. The parent also made the point: “Why not use something that already works?” In this moment I could have used my power and authority as the course instructor and Principal Investigator of the FAF project to impose e-mail as the main form of communication between stakeholders. It would have been more convenient for me and the university students.

Instead, I realized, as Fals-Borda (1991) points out, that “authentic commitment” to a project or goal occurs when “agents of change” are active in the “rejection of asymmetry implicit in the subject/object relationship” (p. 4). As an external agent of

change committed to the shared FAF goals the parents and students had established through working on a collaborative action plan, I willingly accepted the parent's suggestion. Instead of viewing the parent as the "object" of the research, I valued the parent's position as a co-educator whose practical recommendation, ultimately, facilitated better communication. Then, in front of the students and families, I made it explicit that the parent's suggestion to use WhatsApp was actually the better choice in connecting all stakeholders participating in the family-driven workshops. In acknowledging the parent's idea, I implicitly modeled for students the importance of listening to and acting upon families' recommendations so that students would see their university professor adopting and integrating families' contributions as part of the course curriculum and instruction. Fortunately, I understood the significance of this moment. The learning taking place was co-constructed. It was not imposed in a top-down, rigid manner but rather was a fluid, organic process both genuine and reciprocal. In this space and circumstance, families' power to shape the trajectory of the project was palpable giving students the opportunity to see them taking charge of decisions that positively impacted communication between them to better facilitate their work on shared goals.

## Conclusion and implications

Family as Faculty projects embedded in special education teacher preparation courses, intentional in locating parents of children with disabilities in positions of power and authority, have the potential to shift future special education teachers' understandings of family expertise and knowledge. To *learn from* parents who are co-investigators and co-educators of FAF projects during their early formation as teachers, shapes and changes students' perceptions of families' worth, assets and contributions (Santamaría Graff et al., 2020). To have opportunities not only to learn from but also to *work with* families on specific shared goals or projects provides students with insightful understandings about how they can better incorporate families' strengths into their classroom and pedagogical activities.

The shift from viewing families as "outsiders" to "agents of change" is profound as both future teachers and families participating in FAF projects recalibrate the role of families in educational decisions impacting the child. Families as agents of change means that families will, at last, not only "sit" at the decision-making table that IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) has intended for them, but they also will have the opportunity to vocalize their support or dissent of school policies directly connected to their child's special education program. For multiply marginalized families who historically have been peripheral rather than central stakeholders on student-centered teams or in other educational spaces, FAF as an approach can be used to model tangible ways to reposition families in key roles in both pre-K-12 and higher educational settings. These roles extend beyond the classroom as families' expertise can be integrated into research to inform inquiry, data, and outcomes related to disability and other intersectional identity markers that contribute directly to a family's overall lived experience.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Additional resources

### 1. Chávez-Reyes, C. (2010). Inclusive approaches to parent engagement for young English Language Learners and their families. *National Society for the Study of Education*, 109(2), 474 - 504.

In this article, the author describes “inclusive approaches” that are centered as tangible ways to accept and value students’ home languages and cultures as contributive to transformational change in schools. Young emergent bi- or multi-linguals’ and their families’ knowledge is positioned favorably, rather than as liability, in collaborative home-school relationships. Four specific characteristics (*accept and value, acknowledge, focus, and empower*) are highlighted and expanded upon as approaches to promote inclusive parent-family engagement.

### 2. Fennimore, B. S. (2017). Permission not required: The power of parents to disrupt educational hypocrisy. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 159–181. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16687974>

This review of literature focuses on the experiences of historically minoritized or nondominant families who resist inequitable school practices that marginalize their children. The author unearths the ways in which these families struggle against current hegemonic structures, institutions and paradigms to fight for theirs and their children’s rights to fair practices. Finally, the author calls for an increase in observer-activist-participant research paradigms that, when honed, can be used as tools to disrupt uneven power relations that reproduce inequity.

### 3. Young-Chan, H., & Love, J. (2015). Stages of immigrant parent involvement – survivors to leaders. *Immigration & Education*, 97(4), 21 – 25.

In this article, the authors describe a new parent involvement model called “Stages of Immigrant Parent Involvement” that takes into consideration the global experiences of U.S. immigrants. This model centers immigrant families’ needs, interests, and skills through evolving stages (Cultural Survivor, Cultural Learner, Cultural Connector, and Cultural Leader) that assist educators working with immigrant families to better identify and assist families’ unique challenges. The ultimate goal of this model is for immigrant family members to empower themselves, become leaders in their communities, and to assist other families who are experiencing similar struggles.