Words Matter: Differences in Informative and Negative School Communication in Engaging Families

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Abstract

Family engagement frameworks identify communication as a critical component in creating partnerships with families. However, schools create various barriers to engagement, often starting with a lack of communication, that unequally impact racialized and minoritized families. In addition, the association between communication and family engagement is likely to differ across the content of communication and types of family engagement. This study examines the relationship between school communication content and different types of family engagement and how this relationship differs for racialized subgroups. The findings show positive associations between informative school communication and school-, home-, and community-based family engagement, while negative communications were not associated with any type of family engagement. Analyses also indicated that the relationship between informative communication and family engagement was stronger for Latino families for school- and home-based engagement.

Key Words: family engagement, school–home communication, relationships

Introduction

Although researchers have long argued whether the "family or school" matter more in students' educational outcomes, Alexander (2016) claims that

this enduring argument is in fact misdirected: researchers must instead focus on the family *and* school *and* community. In fact, partnerships between school staff and families are associated with better academic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes for students (e.g., Carter, 2002; Sheldon, 2003, 2007; Wilder, 2014). However, though most families want to be engaged in their child's education, many schools create barriers to involvement (Epstein et al., 2019; Henderson et al., 2007)—barriers that unequally impact racialized and minoritized[1] families (Sanders et al., 2002). Within this inequitable and uncertain context, families understandably wait for schools to initiate outreach (Davies, 1991). Thus, communications from the school play a critical role in developing school–family partnerships, especially when striving to promote equitable outcomes for students, families, and communities (Epstein et al., 2019; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Notably, various family engagement frameworks identify communication as a key factor in establishing relationships and developing partnerships between schools and families (Epstein et al., 2019; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Without the creation of these foundational connections, meaningful family engagement is not possible—and schools are well positioned to initiate these connections. Still, practitioners and policymakers often push family engagement without fully understanding the nuances of communication and without recognizing that many family engagement practices continue to exclude minoritized families and communities (Auerbach, 2007; Sanders et al., 2002).

This article attempts to further our understanding of the role of communication in establishing more equitable, more authentic family engagement within schools, especially as school barriers unequally impact racialized and minoritized families. The current study used the 2016 National Household Education Surveys (NHES:2016) Program data to examine the relationship between different kinds of school communication and types of family engagement and how this relationship might vary by racialized subgroups. The estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) models found that higher parent reports of informative and invitational school communication were associated with greater levels of school-, home-, and community-based engagement. Conversely, negative communications about behavior and schoolwork were not related to any type of family engagement. The associations between informative communication and family engagement were stronger for Latino families on school- and home-based practices. Although previous literature recognized the role of communication in facilitating family engagement, this study reveals important distinctions among the content of the communications and potential differences among minoritized subgroups.

Literature Review

Family Engagement

Over the past several decades, family engagement in school has sustained the interest of research, practice, and policy (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013), as it has been linked to positive academic (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007; Sheldon, 2003), behavioral (Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), and social outcomes (El Nokali et al., 2010). Correspondingly, practitioners and policymakers have increasingly prioritized family engagement as a key school reform effort, often including aspects of family engagement in teacher, principal, and school standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Henderson, 2016). Researchers have also developed frameworks to understand the different ways in which families engage in their children's learning and educational experiences (Epstein, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Though defined in various ways, family engagement is commonly categorized into school-based, home-based, and community-based engagement (Epstein et al., 2019; Fantuzzo et al., 2004; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

School-based engagement is the type most traditionally associated with family engagement (Sanders et al., 2002). This type of engagement includes volunteering in classrooms, attending school events or conferences, participating in the Parent Teacher Association or Organization (PTA/PTO), and serving on school committees (Epstein et al., 2019). School-based engagement has been shown to predict student academic performance at the student and school levels (Park & Holloway, 2017). Although school-based family engagement may be the most visible to and encouraged by schools, this kind of involvement can have a high barrier to entry, as it requires parents to physically go to the school (Sanders et al., 2002).

Inflexible work hours, emerging English communication skills, or discomfort or unfamiliarity with the school environment may inhibit or discourage families from approaching the school—especially if the school has fixed volunteer hours, limited interpreters, or an unwelcoming front office (Epstein et al., 2019). Families may feel insecure or unprepared to volunteer in a classroom if they have limited formal education or "untraditional" sources of capital, especially if the school does not actively facilitate families' preparation to become involved and find school-based engagement opportunities that fit the families' strengths (Barton et al., 2004; Trumbull et al., 2003). Furthermore, schools can act as institutions of surveillance and control as well as sites of trauma; families who have experienced incarceration, have undocumented status, or are distrustful of institutions may avoid the school altogether (Haskins & Jacobsen,

2017; Lofton, 2019; Olivos, 2009; Petrone, 2016; Ruffin-Adams & Wilson, 2011). Especially if attempting to create more equitable access to schools for families, it is crucial to recognize that even the same school can be perceived differently by different groups or individuals, particularly those who have been minoritized or racialized.

Home-based engagement captures much of how many families are already involved in their students' lives. Parenting practices (Epstein, 1995; Jeynes, 2010), helping students learn at home (Epstein, 1995), discussing school or academic goals (Hill & Tyson, 2009), and providing moral and emotional guidance (Auerbach, 2007) all fall under home-based engagement. Home-based engagement has been linked to fewer student behavioral problems and positive student approaches to learning (Fantuzzo et al., 2004). Unlike school-based involvement, home-based involvement has a much lower barrier to entry; parents can conduct all practices at home using their own "funds of knowledge," or assets and strengths that they already possess (Moll et al., 1992). However, home-based involvement can frequently go unrecognized by the school, particularly when conducted by minoritized or racialized families (Auerbach, 2007). If teachers or schools are not purposeful with the way they promote home-based engagement, such as using interactive homework assignments meant for family collaboration (Van Voorhis, 2003), parents can perceive home-based engagement as intimidating or uninviting. Much like school-based engagement, it is important to understand how a narrow understanding of home-based engagement can disengage or ignore the efforts of minoritized families.

Finally, community-based engagement includes school or family experiences and engagement with the local community (Sanders, 2007). Community-based engagement can range from community organizations sponsoring events to individual community members connecting school staff and families with community resources and services (Epstein et al., 2019). Epstein et al.'s (2019) conceptualization of community-based involvement focuses on building school–community partnerships to identify resources for students in the community. Other researchers have also documented effective partnerships between families and community-based organizations in advocating for school reform goals, ranging from training parent leadership to helping establish community schools (Ishimaru, 2014; McAlister et al., 2012; Warren, 2005). In this article, community-based engagement is understood as a hybrid of these two conceptualizations: families engaging with community resources or groups to facilitate and support student development.

Inequity in White- and Middle-Class-Normative Family Engagement

Research and practice around school–family–community partnerships tend to center around the standards and practices of middle-class or wealthy White

parents (Auerbach, 2007; Doucet, 2011b; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Posey-Maddox, 2013). Problematically, practices focusing on racialized or minoritized families often apply deficit-based perspectives, seeing the role of schools as "fixing" the cultural deficits of families and communities (Park & Paulick, 2021; Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). Consequently, the frameworks emerging from this body of work necessarily recognize, legitimize, and value middle-class White practices of family engagement. In turn, these frameworks and practices greatly overlook, exclude, and devalue the efforts of racialized and minoritized families.

Therefore, researchers must critically examine how family engagement is defined and understood in ways that inherently promote dominant perspectives and narratives. For instance, lower levels of family engagement from minoritized populations may reflect an active avoidance of schools by families (Doucet, 2011b; Petrone, 2016) and exclusionary school practices (Henderson et al., 2007; Lofton, 2019; Sanders et al., 2002). African American families in Lofton's (2019) study viewed school practices, like tracking, as a way that dominant school structures controlled racialized students' experiences. Research has also documented White middle-class families using their position of relative privilege to create exclusionary environments and policies that further marginalize minoritized families and students (Posey-Maddox, 2013; Wells & Serna, 1996).

The current study attempts to continue the work of critical scholars in recognizing the inequity within dominant family engagement research and practice. The first step is understanding family engagement as complex, multifaceted practices conducted by most families in various environments, but most "visible" when abiding to dominant norms.

Communication and Family Engagement

Many major family engagement frameworks emphasize the importance of communication in establishing school–family relationships. Epstein et al. (2019) identified communication as one of the six types of involvement, expanding on the traditional notion of communication—a one-way flow of information from schools to families or communities—to include a multi-path network of information that connects schools, families, students, and communities through many channels. Similarly, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) identified the importance of invitations from the school, teachers, and students in signaling to parents that their involvement is welcomed. This perception of invitations for involvement increases parents' involvement at home and at school.

Despite this emphasis on communication, many nuances in the relationship between school communication and family engagement remain unexamined. For instance, the literature identifies groups with whom schools struggle to communicate, including immigrant or non-English speaking families (Baker et

al., 2016; Lowenhaupt & Montgomery, 2018; Snell, 2018), parents with lower levels of educational attainment (Sanders et al., 2002), low-income families (Malone, 2017), families of students with disabilities (Hirano et al., 2018), and families of secondary school students (Mac Iver et al., 2015; Spera, 2005). As a result, school communications can reproduce inequities in family engagement based on race/ethnicity, class, and other minoritized status.

Moreover, school–home interactions inherently require cross-cultural communication across the "school culture" and "home culture"; regardless of how home and school cultures are defined, this cross-cultural communication requires risks for those involved (Doucet, 2011b). Researchers have illustrated how minoritized families can have different cultural expectations for schools, which can include differences in family engagement and communication practices (Trumbull et al., 2003; Valdés, 1996), further complicating the cross-cultural communication between home and school. Schools—as institutions of relative power in the school–family dynamic—must acknowledge that families risk more than schools when attempting to create a home–school connection, especially minoritized families (Doucet, 2011b). While schools risk facing only rejection, minoritized families risk potential repudiation or institutional betrayal, surveillance and control, and perpetuation of dominant power structures (Doucet, 2011b; Haskins & Jacobsen, 2017; Petrone, 2016; Ruffin-Adams & Wilson, 2011). Olivos (2009) highlighted how families with undocumented immigration status may avoid contact with the school due to fear of exposing their immigration status.

Taken together, communication between the school and families occurs in the context of social inequities and families' potential anxiety or concern with being involved. This complex context created by power imbalances and differential barriers for minoritized groups points to potential variability of the impact of communication on family engagement.

Existing studies tend to explore the effects of one type of communication (e.g., texting) on a particular parent action (e.g., literacy activity; Doss et al., 2019; Hurwitz et al., 2015; Snell et al., 2020). Prior research also identifies interrelated factors that affect school communication and family engagement. For example, school communication and parent satisfaction together influence parent efficacy, which affects family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Park & Holloway, 2018). Qualitative work has also highlighted the importance of ongoing and intensive methods of communication, like conducting home visits and action research projects (Huss-Keeler, 1997; Kirmaci, 2019; Trumbull et al., 2003). However, these studies do not examine the direct relationship between general school communications and family engagement, nor do they systematically differentiate between the content of the communication and type of engagement.

Moreover, schools are quite proactive when communicating to families about negative behavior or poor performance on schoolwork (Baker et al., 2016). Negative communications portray schools as unwelcoming and reactive to problems, ultimately inhibiting family engagement (Baker et al., 2016)—thus, negative communications must be clearly differentiated from other kinds of communication. Though practitioners might know this through their everyday experiences (e.g., Williams & Cartledge, 1997), quantitative research has done little exploration of the content of communications. To better understand the role of communication in promoting family engagement, we must untangle the relationships among types of school communication, types of family engagement, and minoritized families.

Theoretical Framework and Potential Mechanisms

Though various frameworks connect communication to family engagement, Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence illustrates how communication can act as a mechanism to increase family and community engagement with schools. At the core of Epstein's theory are the environments—or spheres of influence—in which students spend most of their lives: the school, the home, and the community. These spheres of influence can be pulled together or pushed apart through internal forces, like relationships between individuals and institutions, and external forces, such as the experiences and philosophies of each environment. The closer these spheres of influence, the more coherent and holistic the developmental and educational experience of a child and the greater the engagement across school, family, and community environments. School communication can act both as internal and external forces within Epstein's theory. Straightforwardly, school communications can be an internal force by initiating and sustaining relationships between schools, families, and communities. School communication can also act as an external force, sharing with families the school philosophy toward family engagement and helping establish a welcoming climate inviting of families and communities.

However, as previously stated, the relationship between school communication and family engagement is made more complex by structures and systems that uphold dominant norms. Thus, school communication may systematically differ in its efficacy for increasing family engagement for minoritized families. Indeed, analyzing race/ethnicity as a single-dimensional, static variable is inherently limited (Elias & Feagin, 2016; Omi & Winant, 2015). Still, it is important to recognize the material implications that racialized groups experience because of the socially and purposefully created hierarchy. Thus, this article incorporates analyses that use static, imperfect measures for race/ethnicity to examine the implications of racialization.

Though Epstein's (1987) theory would likely point to school communication increasing family engagement for all racialized subgroups, the literature on racialized and minoritized families provides a less straightforward relationship. Foremost, families can perceive the deficit lens applied to them and actively resist the school and home from overlapping (Doucet, 2011b; Lawson, 2003). If this is the case, no amount of school communication would increase family engagement, especially school-based family engagement, as families will clearly delineate between the home and school environments. However, other research highlights that perceived language barriers and general lack of transparency from the school can inhibit school- and home-based engagement, in which case communication from the school could increase family engagement (Doucet, 2011a; Vera et al., 2017). It is unclear whether school communication would increase, decrease, or not impact family engagement for racialized subgroups of families.

This Study

Theoretically, communication between the school and family can establish pathways to share information, concerns, and support—ultimately bringing closer the home and school environments. Yet, it is unclear whether this relationship between school communication and family engagement is the same across racialized subgroups of families. Using a nationally representative dataset, the current study examines the impact of various informative and invitational school communication methods (henceforth called informative communication), as reported by parents, on different types of family engagement and how this relationship might differ by racialized subgroups:

RQ 1: To what extent is there a relationship between informative communication and school-, home-, and community-based family engagement?

RQ 2: To what extent is there a relationship between negative communication and school-, home-, and community-based family engagement?

RQ 3: Does the relationship between informative communication and family engagement vary in magnitude between school-, home-, and community-based engagement?

RQ 4: Does the relationship between informative communication and family engagement vary between racialized subgroups of families?

I expect informative communication to be positively related to school-based, home-based, and community-based engagement; negative communication to have no relationship to any kind of family engagement; the association between informative communication and school-based engagement to be the strongest

compared to home- and community-based engagement; and communication to have a differential association with racialized families.

Methods

Data

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Weighted Analytic Sample

	Mean
Child Characteristics	
Male	0.52
White	0.71
Black	0.17
Latino/Hispanic	0.24
Asian	0.08
Other race	0.04
Disability status	0.17
English spoken at home	0.86
Parent Characteristics	
Male	0.28
Education	
High school diploma or equivalent	0.36
Vocational or associate degree	0.12
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.38
School Characteristics	
Public	0.91
Elementary school	0.49
Middle school	0.23
High school	0.28
N = 13,463	

I used data from the Parent and Family Involvement in Education survey (PFI) of the 2016 National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES:2016). NHES:2016 used a nationally representative sample including participants from all 50 states and the District of Columbia (McQuiggan et al., 2017). Of those sampled for the NHES:2016, a screener survey was used to assign a household member for one of three topical surveys, one of which was the PFI. The PFI was answered by a parent or guardian of the sampled student

either enrolled in K–12 in public or private school or homeschooled (McQuiggan et al., 2017). Appropriate weights were calculated to represent a national sample of students enrolled in K–12 in 2015–16 (McQuiggan et al., 2017).

The sample of completed questionnaires was 14,075. Solely (N = 552) and partially (N = 60) homeschooled students were excluded from the analysis. The final analytic sample included 13,463 cases of students enrolled in public or private schools. With this analytic sample, no data were missing. See Table 1 for demographic characteristics of the weighted analytic sample.

Measures

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables were three different measures of family engagement: school-based, home-based, and community-based involvement. The PFI included three sets of questions, each asking parents whether they participated in a series of practices or activities at school, at home, or in the community. These groups of items were combined to create scales for each type of family engagement, as researchers have previously done with similar questions from earlier iterations of NHES (Myers & Myers, 2015; Oswald et al., 2018; Park & Holloway, 2018).

School-based family engagement. The scale for school-based family involvement (α = 0.66) included items asking whether a parent/guardian or another adult in the household had conducted any of the following school-based involvement activities since the beginning of the school year: attended a school event, served as a volunteer, attended a school meeting, attended a parent teacher organization (PTA/PTO) meeting, attended a parent–teacher conference, participated in fundraising, served on a school committee, or met with a guidance counselor. Items were coded yes (1) or no (0), averaged across the items, and standardized. Though the items tend to focus on more traditional forms of school-based engagement with high barriers to entry, such as participation in the PTO or volunteering in the classroom, the scale does capture a slightly more inclusive definition of school-based engagement, such as attending a school event.

Home-based family engagement. To identify home-based family involvement (α = 0.59), a parent/guardian or another adult in the household were asked if they took part in any of the following home-based involvement activities in the past week: told a story to the child, spent time on arts and crafts, played board games, worked on a project, spent time playing sports, discussed time management, or discussed their ethnic heritage/family history. Items were coded yes (1) or no (0), averaged across the items, and standardized. The items included in home-based engagement were much more inclusive than the

school-based engagement scale. In addition to the typical home-based practices associated with wealthier and White families, such as enabling participation in extracurricular activities (Lareau, 2011), this scale included home-based engagement practices that have been associated with racialized families, like parent facilitation of moral and emotional development (Auerbach, 2007).

Community-based family engagement. To capture community-based family involvement (α = 0.55), a parent/guardian or another adult in the household were asked if they engaged in the following activities with the child in the past month: visited a library; visited a bookstore; attended a play; visited an art gallery; visited a zoo; attended an event sponsored by a community, religious, or ethnic group; or attended a sporting event. Items were coded yes (1) or no (0), averaged across the items, and standardized. This scale was the least reliable out of the three family engagement scales, which is likely because the items tend to fall into two categories: practices that are free, and practices that require payment. In addition, the scale focused more on how individual family members interacted with various resources, rather than capturing an ongoing partnership across the home and community.

Independent Variables

Informative communication. The main independent variable of interest was a 5-item measure for informative school communication (α = 0.78). The scale included five questions asking how well the school provides the following communications: child's progress between school reports; information on how to help with homework; information on class placement; information on the parent's expected role; information about college or vocational school. A four-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (very well) to 4 (does not do it at all). Items were reverse-coded, so a higher score corresponded with a more positive response. One item (information about college and vocational school) included a response category of 5 (does not apply). This was recoded as the lowest end of the scale because if parents report that this item does not apply, the school likely does not send information about this. Items were averaged and standardized.

Negative communication. Parents were asked how many times the school contacted them regarding poor behavior and how many times the school contacted them regarding problems with schoolwork. Because many parents were never contacted with negative communications, both items were recoded into dummy variables: whether the school contacted (1) or never contacted (0) the parents about poor behavior; and whether the school contacted (1) or never contacted (0) the parents about problems with schoolwork.

Parent satisfaction with school practices. The measure for parent satisfaction (α = 0.89) included five questions asking how satisfied parents were with

each of the following: the school the child attends this year; the teachers this child has this year; the academic standards of the school; the order and discipline at the school; the way that school staff interacts with parents. A four-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (very satisfied) to 4 (very dissatisfied). Items were reverse-coded, so a higher score corresponded with a more positive response. All items were averaged and standardized.

Student school performance. Parents were asked to describe their student's work at school on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (excellent) to 5 (failing). This variable was reverse-coded, so a higher score corresponded with better performance.

Other independent variables. The following variables were also included in the models: English spoken at home; child race/ethnicity and gender; child disability status; gender of parent completing the survey; highest educational degree attained by the parent completing the survey; total household income; private or public school; and school level.

Analysis

I estimated a series of OLS models using robust standard errors to examine the relationship between informative communication and family engagement. All models were estimated three times, using each of the three family engagement types as the outcome variable, controlling for potential confounding variables. Subsequently, I compared the coefficients for informative communication across the types of family engagement. I also calculated interactions between informative communication and racial/ethnic subgroups.

Results

The analyses in this study examined the relationships among different kinds of school communication and three different types of family engagement, and how this relationship might vary across racialized subgroups. I hypothesized that informative communication will be positively associated with school-, home-, and community-based family engagement; that this association will be strongest between informative communication and school-based family engagement; and that this relationship will differ across racialized subgroups. I also expected to see no association between negative communication and family engagement.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 describes the standardized scales for the three types of family engagement, the standardized scale for informative communication, and negative

communication about behavior and schoolwork across the demographic variables. Families with Black (M = -0.08, SD = 1.00), Latino/Hispanic (M = -0.18, SD = 1.03), and Asian (M = -0.16, SD = 1.03) students reported lower than average levels of school-based engagement, though this pattern is small and not present in home- or community-based engagement. As previously stated, this lower level of school-based family engagement can be related to myriad factors including avoidance of schools, discomfort with schools, and inaccessibility of the school. In addition, families with lower educational degrees attained and families with students in secondary schools tend to report lower than average levels of all engagement types. Again, this corresponds with previous literature identifying these patterns—those with lower levels of educational attainment or with older students may feel less comfortable engaging with school-related activities, especially if the school does not consciously create family-friendly environments or practices.

Table 2. Weighted Descriptive Statistics by Demographic Categories

	Type of Family Engagement			Type of Communication		
	School (z-score)	Home (z-score)	Communi-ty (z-score)	Informative (z-score)	Negative – Behavior	Negative – Schoolwork
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Total analytic sample	-0.01 (0.99)	0.09 (1.00)	0.01 (1.00)	0.01 (0.99)	0.19 (0.39)	0.22 (0.42)
Child Characteristics						
Female	0.01 (0.97)	0.11 (1.02)	0.09 (1.02)	0.03 (1.0)	0.12 (0.33)	0.17 (0.38)
Male	-0.03 (1.00)	0.06 (0.98)	-0.06 (0.97)	-0.01 (0.98)	0.25 (0.43)	0.27 (0.44)
White	0.11 (0.94)	.02 (0.95)	.01 (0.96)	-0.2 (1.00)	0.17 (0.38)	0.22 (0.41)
Black	-0.08 (1.00)	0.12 (1.01)	0.09 (1.06)	-0.02 (1.02)	0.33 (0.47)	0.31 (0.46)
Latino/ Hispanic	-0.18 (1.03)	0.20 (1.01)	-0.03 (1.00)	0.06 (0.96)	0.16 (0.36)	0.20 (0.40)
Asian	-0.16 (1.03)	0.004 (1.13)	0.002 (1.06)	0.11 (0.93)	0.11 (0.32)	0.11 (0.31)
Other race	0.002 (1.00)	0.26 (0.94)	0.04 (1.03)	0.01 (1.03)	0.16 (0.37)	0.25 (0.43)
Disability status	0.03 (0.97)	0.07 (0.99)	-0.01 (0.99)	-0.02 (0.99)	0.31 (0.46)	0.38 (0.48)
Non-disability status	-0.02 (0.99)	0.09 (1.00)	0.01 (1.00)	0.01 (0.99)	0.16 (0.37)	0.19 (0.39)

Table 2, Continued

English spoken at home	0.05 (0.97)	0.08 (0.99)	0.03 (1.00)	-0.03 (1.00)	0.20 (0.40)	0.23 (0.42)
English not spoken at home	-0.40 (1.00)	0.10 (1.07)	-0.11 (0.98)	0.25 (0.88)	0.13 (0.34)	0.16 (0.37)
Parent Characteristics						
Female	-0.03 (0.98)	0.08 (1.00)	0.002 (0.99)	-0.02 (1.01)	0.20 (0.40)	0.23 (0.42)
Male	0.04 (0.99)	0.09 (0.99)	0.04 (1.01)	0.08 (0.93)	0.17 (0.37)	0.21 (0.41)
Education						
Less than high school	-0.53 (1.01)	-0.04 (1.09)	-0.29 (0.95)	0.08 (0.97)	0.20 (0.40)	0.24 (0.43)
High school diploma or equivalent	-0.17 (0.97)	0.08 (1.03)	-0.14 (0.98)	-0.03 (1.04)	0.20 (0.40)	0.24 (0.42)
Vocational or associate degree	-0.008 (0.95)	0.13 (1.01)	0.002 (1.00)	-0.04 (1.03)	0.20 (0.40)	0.24 (0.42)
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.31 (0.89)	0.12 (0.94)	0.26 (0.97)	0.04 (0.94)	0.17 (0.37)	0.19 (0.40)
Income group						
$0-$30,000	-0.36 (1.00)	0.09 (1.09)	-0.14 (1.05)	0.06 (1.03)	0.25 (0.43)	0.26 (0.44)
$30,001-$60k	-0.18 (0.99)	0.11 (0.99)	-1.12 (0.97)	-0.04 (1.00)	0.20 (0.40)	0.25 (0.43)
$60,001-$100k	0.04 (0.95)	0.08 (0.99)	0.04 (0.97)	0.0002 (1.00)	0.18 (0.38)	0.21 (0.41)
$100,001+	0.30 (0.90)	0.06 (0.96)	0.19 (0.97)	0.02 (0.96)	0.14 (0.35)	0.18 (0.39)
School Characteristics						
Public	-0.07 (0.98)	0.08 (1.00)	-0.01 (1.00)	-0.03 (1.00)	0.19 (0.39)	0.22 (0.42)
Private	0.55 (0.91)	0.17 (0.97)	0.26 (0.96)	0.40 (0.79)	0.15 (0.36)	0.22 (0.41)
Elementary school	0.19 (0.89)	0.38 (0.92)	0.15 (1.01)	0.11 (0.89)	0.21 (0.41)	0.21 (0.41)
Middle school	-0.12 (0.98)	-0.02 (0.98)	0.0005 (0.95)	-0.07 (1.04)	0.22 (0.41)	0.26 (0.44)
High school	-0.27 (1.08)	-0.34 (0.98)	-0.23 (0.97)	-0.10 (1.09)	0.12 (0.33)	0.21 (0.41)
N = 13,463						

Levels of informative communication is relatively constant across demographic variables; families with Asian students (M = 0.11, SD = 0.93), families who do not speak English at home (M = 0.25, SD = 0.88), and families with students in private schools (M = 0.40, SD = 0.79) and elementary schools (M = 0.11, SD = 0.89) reported higher than average levels of informative communication. Families with male students, Black students, and students with a disability reported higher means of negative contact for both behavior and schoolwork compared to female students, students of other racialized subgroups, and students with no disability status, respectively. Families with bachelor's degrees or higher and making $100,001 or more reported the lowest means of negative communication about behavior and schoolwork among the parental education and income groups, respectively.

OLS Models

Informative Communication

Table 3 shows the estimated models for school-based engagement. Controlling for student demographics, family background, parent satisfaction with the school, student academic performance, and other covariates, model 3s indicates that informative communication was a statistically significant predictor of school-based engagement (β = 0.22, p < 0.001). Table 4 describes the estimated models predicting home-based engagement. Informative communication was a statistically significant predictor of home-based engagement across all models, even when controlling for all independent variables in model 3h (β = 0.22, p < 0.001). Table 5 reports the estimated models predicting community-based engagement. Much like the models for other types of family engagement, informative communication was a statistically significant predictor of community-based engagement even after controlling for all independent variables (β = 0.19, p < 0.001). School communication remained a statistically significant coefficient across all types of family engagement, regardless of the independent variables included in the models.

Table 3. Model of Predicted School-Based Engagement by Informative Communication

	Model 1s	Model 2s	Model 3s
Informative communication (z-score)	0.22*** (0.01)	0.23*** (0.01)	0.22*** (0.01)
Parent satisfaction (z-score)		-0.03 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.01)
Contacted about behavior problems			0.01 (0.03)
Contacted about problems with school-work			0.15 (0.03)

Table 3, Continued

Schoolwork below average			0.04 (0.13)
Schoolwork average			0.13 (0.12)
Schoolwork above average			0.20 (0.12)
Schoolwork excellent			0.28* (0.12)
English spoken at home	0.26*** (0.05)	0.26*** (0.05)	0.26*** (0.05)
Black	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Latino	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Asian	-0.26*** (0.04)	-0.26*** (0.04)	-0.26*** (0.04)
Other race	0.06 (0.07)	0.06 (0.07)	0.06 (0.08)
Male (child gender)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Disability	0.09** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)	0.10** (0.03)
Male (parent gender)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
High school or equivalent (parent education)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.21*** (0.06)	0.20*** (0.05)
Vocational or associate degree (parent education)	0.32*** (0.06)	0.32*** (0.06)	0.31*** (0.06)
Bachelor's degree or higher (parent education)	0.51*** (0.06)	0.51*** (0.06)	0.49*** (0.06)
Income $30,001–$60K	0.11** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)
Income $60,001–$100K	0.22*** (0.04)	0.22*** (0.04)	0.22*** (0.04)
Income $100,001+	0.35*** (0.04)	0.36*** (0.04)	0.35*** (0.04)
Public school	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.34*** (0.04)	-0.33*** (0.04)
Middle school	-0.28*** (0.03)	-0.29*** (0.03)	-0.29*** (0.03)
High school	-0.43*** (0.03)	-0.43*** (0.03)	-0.43*** (0.03)
Constant	-0.22** (0.07)	-0.22** (0.07)	-0.45** (0.14)
Observations	13,463	13,463	13,463
R-squared	0.2128	0.2132	0.2182

Note. Robust standard errors in parentheses. School-based engagement, informative communication, and parent satisfaction have been standardized. * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$

Table 4. Model of Predicted Home-Based Engagement by
Informative Communication

	Model 1h	Model 2h	Model 3h
Informative communication (z-score)	0.17*** (0.01)	0.23*** (0.02)	0.22*** (0.02)
Parent satisfaction (z-score)		-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.12*** (0.02)
Contacted @ behavior problems			-0.04 (0.04)
Contacted @ problems with schoolwork			0.06 (0.04)
Schoolwork below average			-0.14 (0.26)
Schoolwork average			0.02 (0.25)
Schoolwork above average			0.12 (0.25)
Schoolwork excellent			0.21 (0.25)
English spoken at home	0.09 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)
Black	0.08* (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)
Latino	0.20*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)
Asian	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.09 (0.07)
Other race	0.16* (0.07)	0.16* (0.07)	0.16* (0.07)
Male (child gender)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.013 (0.03)
Disability	-0.001 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Male (parent gender)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
High school or equivalent (parent ed)	0.18** (0.07)	0.18** (0.07)	0.18** (0.06)
Vocational or associate degree (parent ed)	0.25*** (0.07)	0.25*** (0.07)	0.23** (0.07)
Bachelor's degree or higher (parent ed)	0.25*** (0.07)	0.25*** (0.07)	0.23** (0.07)
Income $30,001–$60k	0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)
Income $60,001–$100k	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)
Income $100,001+	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)
Public school	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Middle school	-0.37*** (0.04)	-0.40*** (0.04)	-0.40*** (0.04)
High school	-0.68*** (0.03)	-0.71*** (0.03)	-0.71*** (0.03)
Constant	0.08 (0.11)	0.11 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.28)
Observations	13,463	13,463	13,463
R-squared	0.1363	0.1432	0.1498

Note. Robust standard errors in parentheses. School-based engagement, informative communication, and parent satisfaction have been standardized. * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$

Table 5. Model of Predicted Community-Based Engagement by Informative Communication

	Model 1c	Model 2c	Model 3c
Informative communication (z-score)	0.16*** (0.01)	0.20*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)
Parent satisfaction (z-score)		-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)
Contacted @ behavior problems			-0.07 (0.04)
Contacted @ problems with schoolwork			0.06 (0.04)
Schoolwork below average			0.24* (0.11)
Schoolwork average			0.43*** (0.09)
Schoolwork above average			0.54*** (0.10)
Schoolwork excellent			0.66 *** (0.10)
English spoken at home	0.07 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)
Black	0.16*** (0.04)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.04)
Latino	0.12** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)
Asian	-0.05 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.05)
Other race	0.05 (0.07)	0.04 (0.07)	0.05 (0.07)
Male (child gender)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.09** (0.03)
Disability	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.09* (0.03)
Male (parent gender)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
High school or equivalent (parent ed)	0.15** (0.05)	0.15** (0.05)	0.14** (0.05)
Vocational or associate degree (parent ed)	0.28*** (0.06)	0.28*** (0.06)	0.26*** (0.06)
Bachelor's degree or higher (parent ed)	0.50*** (0.06)	0.50*** (0.06)	0.46*** (0.05)
Income $30,001–$60k	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Income $60,001–$100k	0.06 (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Income $100,001+	0.11* (0.04)	0.12** (0.05)	0.10* (0.05)
Public school	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.07 (0.04)
Middle school	-.013*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.14*** (0.03)
High school	-0.34*** (0.03)	-0.36*** (0.03)	-0.37*** (0.03)
Constant	-0.18* (0.08)	-0.16* (0.08)	-0.71 (0.12)
Observations	13,463	13,463	13,463
R-squared	0.1076	0.1104	0.1223

Note. Robust standard errors in parentheses. School-based engagement, informative communication, and parent satisfaction have been standardized. * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$

Negative Communication

The two variables for negative communication were not statistically significant predictors for any type of engagement. In model 3s, the two variables indicating negative communications, contacted about behavior problems (β = 0.01, $p > 0.05$) and problems with schoolwork (β = 0.15, $p > 0.05$), were not statistically significant predictors of school-based family engagement. Contacted about behavior problems (β = -0.04, $p > 0.05$) and problems with schoolwork (β = 0.06, $p > 0.05$) similarly were not associated with home-based involvement. Finally, both contacted about behavior problems (β = -0.07, $p > 0.05$) and problems with schoolwork (β = 0.06, $p > 0.05$) did not statistically significantly predict community-based involvement.

Other Independent Variables

The models also indicated that the association between the higher income groups and school-based family engagement were statistically significant compared to the reference income group ($0–$30,000); however, this association was not statistically significant in home-based engagement for all income groups, and only statistically significant for the highest income group for community-based engagement. This pattern in income may be because higher levels of education attained by the parent remained statistically significant compared to the reference education group (less than high school) in all models—parent education may be accounting for some of the variance between income groups, as they are likely related variables. These findings reaffirm patterns found in extensive literature linking family SES to family engagement (e.g., Lareau, 1989, 2011; Sanders et al., 2002).

Differences Among the Strengths of Associations

Table 6 reports the results of a series of Wald tests comparing the coefficients for informative communication across models with different outcomes. The table indicates informative communication differentially predicted school- and home-based engagement, and school- and community-based engagement for model 1. In the subsequent models, the differences between the coefficients for informative communication across home-, school-, and community-based engagement were not statistically significant.

Interactions

All models were run with an interaction term with informative communication and each of the racialized subgroups with the final model that also included controls for parent satisfaction, negative communications, and student school performance. For school- and home-based engagement, the interaction between informative communication and Latino was the only one

that was statistically significant. For Latino families, compared to other racial/ethnic groups, more informative communication was associated with greater involvement at home ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < 0.05$) and at school ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 6. Differences in Informative Communication Coefficients Across Type of Family Engagement

	School-Based Engagement	Community-Based Engagement
Model 1		
Home-based engagement	**	NS
School-based engagement	—	***
Model 2		
Home-based engagement	NS	NS
School-based engagement	—	NS
Model 3		
Home-based engagement	NS	NS
School-based engagement	—	NS

Note. * = $p < 0.05$, ** = $p < 0.01$, *** = $p < 0.001$, NS = not statistically significant.

Discussion

The study used a nationally representative dataset to examine the association between school communication and family engagement, differentiating between kinds of communication and types of engagement and how this association might differ by racialized subgroups. Previous studies looking at the relationship between school communication and family engagement did not differentiate between positive and negative communication or between different types of family engagement. The use of quantitative methods and a nationally representative dataset can complement and expand the generalizability of the findings beyond the smaller-scale studies and qualitative work conducted in the past.

Informative and Negative Communication

The analyses found that higher reports of informative communication were consistently associated with higher levels of school-, home-, and community-based engagement. These associations remained statistically significant even after controlling for parent satisfaction and student school performance. Negative communications from the school about behavior or schoolwork, on the

other hand, were not significantly associated with any type of engagement, suggesting that the content of communication matters in relation to families' engagement behaviors. If schools want to engage families on goals like improving academic achievement and behavior, then schools must understand that simply telling families that their children are having challenges in the classroom is not associated with increased family engagement. In one model, the relationship was strongest for school-based engagement, suggesting that some outreach methods may be more strongly associated with different kinds of family engagement—however, this difference in associations among the types of engagement was not statistically significant in the more complex models.

These findings are particularly informative as the descriptive statistics showed patterns of negative communications to certain families. Specifically, families with male students, Black students, and students with disabilities reported higher means of negative communications regarding behavior and schoolwork, while their reported levels of informative communication remained similar to other groups. Continuing to send negative communications home can be particularly problematic, given the literature showing that male students, Black students, and students with disabilities are disproportionately overrepresented in school discipline practices (e.g., Merkwae, 2015; Wallace et al., 2008; Wolf, 2017). Even if one were to argue that the negative communications were accurately reflecting actual challenges in schoolwork or behavior, these communications likely do not facilitate the kinds of practices (i.e., family engagement practices in school, at home, or in the community) that schools hope would better support students.

Racialized Families, Family Engagement, and School Communication

Racialized subgroups of families seemed to have differential associations to informative communication. In this study, there was a stronger relationship between informative communication and Latino families' school- and home-based engagement, which is consistent with previous findings in qualitative work (e.g., Hill & Torres, 2010; Trumbull et al., 2003; Valdés, 1996). In a review of research on Latino families' relationships with their children's schools, Hill & Torres (2010) found that many families feel unwelcomed by the school and can hold different expectations for family engagement than schools do. In Ramirez's (2003) study interviewing Latino immigrant parents, one parent, a recent immigrant from Guatemala, told the researcher: "How am I supposed to know this information when we just arrived after the school year started? I did not know anything about the Open House, or what I am supposed to do at it" (p. 99). Informative communication may be particularly effective in demonstrating a welcoming school climate and making explicit the expectations for

engagement. Especially if families and communities view schools as surveilling or trauma-inducing institutions, explicit invitations from the school might help alleviate some of these concerns.

Critically, Olivos (2009) emphasized the importance of recognizing heterogeneity in the Latino community, including—but not limited to—differences in immigrant generation (i.e., first, second, third generation and beyond), immigration status, and country of origin. For instance, in Delgado-Gaitan's (1993) study of Mexican American families, parents who grew up in the United States primarily spoke English at home while those who immigrated from Mexico spoke Spanish at home. Treating Latino populations as a homogeneous group can lead to schools relying on stereotypes for their family engagement practices and further alienating families (Olivos, 2009).

Notably, the descriptive statistics highlighted previous patterns of family engagement across racialized subgroups. Though all major racialized groups—Black, Latino, and Asian—reported lower-than-average levels of school-based family engagement, all three groups also reported higher-than-average levels of home-based family engagement. This pattern, seen in previous literature (Auerbach, 2007), further highlights the importance of schools communicating with families. Foremost, communicating with families can help schools better understand that racialized families are, in fact, engaged with their child's educational experience even if it is invisible from the school's perspective. While school-based engagement may be the most encouraged by schools (e.g., Kirmaci, 2019; Sanders et al., 2002), racialized families might feel more comfortable conducting engagement practices at home or in their communities.

Limitations

These findings should be interpreted acknowledging the limitations to this study. Foremost, the NHES:2016 dataset used addresses to obtain a random sample of the student population in the United States. The use of addresses excludes students or families who may not have a permanent address, including migrant-affected people, people experiencing houselessness, or people with unstable living situations. There are also many parent factors that the NHES:2016 dataset does not include. The 2012 National Household Education Survey dataset, for example, included variables for parent role construction or parent self-efficacy beliefs. As researchers have identified parent role construction and self-efficacy as influential predictors of family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Park & Holloway, 2018), including these variables would better estimate the direct relationship of school communication and family engagement.

Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the data greatly restricts the interpretability of the findings, and causal claims cannot be made. While school

communication and family engagement were related, the direction of the relationship cannot be determined. For instance, parents who participated in more family engagement practices may receive (or perceive) more communication because of their engagement. Future research should try to clarify the direction of this relationship, possibly by using methods that better identify causal relationships or by collecting longitudinal data.

In addition, the study does not link individuals within schools or include school-level factors. This is a substantial limitation, as school factors—like school location, school levels of poverty (or Title-I status), and school racial/ethnic composition—may influence school communication, family engagement, and the racialization process. For instance, communities with large populations of racialized people may have advocacy groups that explicitly center racialized families (e.g., Ishimaru, 2014; Warren, 2005); these communities might have different strategies and networks of communications between families and schools. Researchers have also identified school climate as a critical school-level factor influencing family engagement and school communication (Epstein et al., 2019; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), not explored in this study.

This dataset similarly does not link school communication efforts to systematic implementation of family engagement as a model for school reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Epstein et al., 2019). Schools implementing a schoolwide model for family engagement may have other structural supports facilitating family engagement and communication compared to a school that implements standalone family engagement events. For example, Sheldon and Jung (2015) found that schoolwide implementation of family engagement partnership was linked to better student outcomes on reading and attendance. Future research can examine the effects of school communications when tied to a larger structural school reform agenda.

Finally, the current study defined school communication and family engagement rather narrowly. For instance, items for school communication only included school communications about school-related concerns like parent–teacher conferences or class placement; as traditional types of communication, these may inadvertently exclude and discourage some minoritized families. Future research should explore a wider range of communication and differentiate between types of communication: communications explicitly guiding families to engage in their child's learning may have a differential association with family engagement compared to communications that do not offer guidance for families; communications conveying equity-oriented goals of the school may impact family engagement differently compared to communications that take on a colorblind perspective; more intensive and active forms of communication, like parent–teacher home visits, might also have a differential relationship

to more passive forms of communication, like newsletters. Similarly, family engagement can be defined in broader and more inclusive ways that recognize and elevate the practices of racialized families.

Implications for School Practice

This study, alongside previous literature, provides practical implications for schools. Foremost, the current study indicated that negative communications—while readily sent out by schools—are not associated with family engagement. If communications regarding academic or behavioral challenges are meant to increase certain family supports, notifying the family about this behavior may not change the supports students receive. On the other hand, informative and positive communications could be effective in signaling to families that schools want to build home–school partnerships. These communications can range from sending short notes when a student overcomes a challenge in the classroom to goal-oriented home visits conducted by teams of school staff. These informative school communications could reinforce positive interactions between the home and school.

Furthermore, as emphasized in prior work (Epstein et al., 2019), schools must not only send out communications to families, but also create opportunities for families to communicate back to the school. Too often, communications are a one-way road from the school to the home. Rather, schools should also open channels for families to communicate back to the school, creating two-way paths of communication.

Communication across schools and families can act as a valuable system to strengthen relationships between educators and students' families. Moreover, communication may be a critical tool in promoting equitable family engagement experiences with minoritized families, especially as many schools actively create barriers excluding minoritized families' engagement and fail to recognize the family engagement that minoritized families conduct. Though school communications may start simply as information-sharing, like inviting families to share their experiences, these channels of communication can widen to include spaces to share concerns, discuss best practices, and foster authentic partnerships (Ishimaru, 2019). With constantly evolving technology, schools have more ways to communicate with families than ever before, continually increasing the possible avenues to partner with families in authentic and equitable ways—communication, especially with racialized and minoritized families, is necessary for this pathway toward authentic engagement to materialize.

Endnote

[1]The term "racialized" is used to address people whose race and/or ethnic background has been ascribed an identity to differentiate them from White populations in U.S. society (Omi &

Winant, 2015). This term better captures the idea that race is socially constructed, historically embedded, and dynamic. "Minoritized" is used in a similar and sometimes interchangeable manner, but includes other identities—such as class, immigration status, disability status, and linguistic background—that have been used to differentiate people from the dominant population in the U.S. (e.g., Flores & Rosa, 2015).

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