

Highest Aspirations Podcast: S1/E15

Using Technology to Engage EL Families with Heejae Lim

Steve:

Okay, so welcome. Heejae, happy to have you here with us on Highest Aspirations. Could you start by telling us a little bit about what sparked your interest in improving family engagement and education?

Heejae:

Yeah, absolutely, Steve. Thank you for having me on the podcast. Talking Points and my interest in family engagement really came out of my personal experience of growing up as a Korean immigrant student in the suburbs in London. I moved from Korea to England when I was eight and went to a local public elementary school, which was full of students like me. I saw that my own mother was able to engage in my education and make a difference because she had the voice, she was able to help me with my homework, she knew what it meant when a reading packet was sent home and when there was a permission slip to be handed in.

But I also saw that many of the parents of the children that I was friends with, they could not do the same. The effect of it was that many of those struggles in school when I was able to have the trajectory that I did. When I reflect back on that experience, the difference between those friends and myself wasn't necessarily intelligence or effort, but it was just more about how my own mom was engaged in my education.

Steve:

So like many great entrepreneurs and educators, I would say you, when had an experience and you went about trying to live it basically. With that, tell us a little bit about Talking Points tech solution to this very human centered challenge. Why text messages and how do you go about translating them into over 20 different languages?

Heejae:

Yeah, absolutely. I can tell you a little about Talking Points first. Teachers and school administrators use a web and mobile application to send a message. The parents get in text messages. Now that as a very recently a mobile application in their languages. Messages can be about what students are learning in class, how parents can support learning at home, and updates on student behaviors. Then parents can reply in their languages back to the teachers.

The two way translation goes through human translators, through a crowdsourcing application that's on both web and mobile that we built on the back end. Then messages are also censored and prioritized depending on the sender, the content of the messages, and how time sensitive it is. Then we use the human generated data to train the internal translation engine so it improves with time. We also use machine translation like Google translate. Eventually our grand plan is to

ask parents to be volunteers in this translation process since many, many teachers and many parents are doing this anyway. We're excited to explore more in this area.

Why text messages? We chose text messages when we started the work three years ago because more than 95% of low income families have access to unlimited texting plans or a basic mobile phone. We wanted to maximize the ability to be able to serve everyone including those who are the hardest to reach now. Since since then we have expanded. Earlier this year, we just launched a mobile application for families as well. It really came from the demand of teachers and families, which we see as really encouraging because it perhaps means that the tech accessibility issue is not so much of a big issue as when we first started off with the work.

Steve:

That's great. A lot to unpack there. I think it's wonderful that you're... It sounds like your basis for this as human translators, which I feel like helps gain credibility among people who maybe don't trust machine learning. But then there is that machine learning piece that learns from what the human translators are doing. Then I love the idea of the grand plan, as you call the eventually using parents. There's certainly a lot of research out there that shows that engaging families in this way can not only help in this case improve translations and provide a service to the school, but also basically increase the family engagement, and then help the students be more successful.

Then the text message question, I did want to ask you that question so that you could answer it from your perspective. That I was involved in the creation of an online course about family engagement, the Harvard Graduate School of Education. One of the things that we learned was that text messages were very accessible technology, for lack of a better term, that parents had access to. You mentioned 95% have access to it. I think that's great.

You got into my next question, which was about how you're constantly evolving as you learn from your partners who are at schools and parents. Are there any other future plans that you're looking into as you move forward here?

Heejae:

Yeah, absolutely. We're really excited about our future plans here. When we first started the work, where the idea behind Talking Points really came to be was by looking at what are the barriers to family involvement and engagement in the underserved diverse communities we work with. If you think about language and tech accessibility being one, the other side of the coin is about mindsets and perceptions and the knowledge and skills. But both on the educator side as well as the families to work together, and for the families to support their children's learning and feeling empowered to do that.

By that we really mean in these communities a lot of the family members and parents are not as educated or perhaps they did not go to school in the U.S. Because of that feel more lost or less empowered to make a difference. Even though every family member we believe can really

make a difference in their children's learning. The same with the educators. A lot of the teachers don't necessarily get the training or professional development around family engagement, let alone working with families in these lower income, more diverse communities.

Our future plan is to be able to tackle knowledge and skills building. By that we mean increasing both the teachers and the family's capacity to be involved, to form partnerships and to work together. We are doing this within the platform, to be able to give content and personalized advice that's timely, that's relevant, and that's actionable. But within the context of their day-to-day workflow. Again here we are confident that we can personalize this using artificial intelligence and natural language processing so it's more specific to that teacher or the family member.

If I can give you a real example, the advice would be depending on who the student is, how they have behaved in the past, what the topical conversation between the teachers and parents are on what's being learned in the classroom as well. If we can detect that there is a homework assignment due next week and can suggest to the parent what actionable steps they can take to help the child so that it's handed on time. We're excited about this school year and will be releasing a pilot version, more of a beta version of this in time for the 18-19 school year.

Steve:

That's great and I love that you started that whole piece off with the idea of mindsets and perspectives, and that you brought up parent's mindsets who may have not had the experience in the United States schools or have limited education in general. But you also brought up the teachers, and I can tell you that myself as a long time foreign language teacher, I had really essentially no training in family and community engagement. If you had asked me when I first started teaching how important it was and it's on scale compared to other things, I probably wouldn't have given it that much importance because I was a high school teacher. It pains me to say that, but that's the truth. As time went along, I started to learn how important it was, but that was only anecdotally for me. I love that you're attempting to tackle that, those mindset issues.

Heejae:

Yeah, and fortunately, we are so empathetic to teachers. I mean you're so busy, and there is 100 million things going on in the school day. Family engagement does make a difference, but it's often not to do with classroom management or your day-to-day, so I hear you on that.

Steve:

I want to shift the focus a little bit to hone in on English language learners. You know as well as we do here at Elevation that we're seeing an increase of English language learners in a lot of communities that aren't necessarily accustomed to such such linguistic and cultural diversity. I think in some places this is not a new thing. You go to Texas or California and people are relatively accustomed to. I'm generalizing some, but some of the districts that I've worked with here in the Northeast and on the East Coast in general are really seeing a huge influx. They don't have a lot of training. People aren't really thinking about family engagement with this

population, and they don't even know how to do it. I'm curious as to how Talking Points as an organization is working, or are you working to mitigate some of those challenges with a lack of experience of working with these demographics?

Heejae:

Absolutely. What we're observing in the schools, or at least in terms of where a lot of the demands Of Talking Points comes from, is in these schools where the student demographics are changing really fast. But the resources or the experience and the expertise haven't quite kept up to meet these demands and the changes. As you mentioned, teachers are not given at least enough training or coaching to work with these families of diverse backgrounds. In fact, we have seen that many teacher training programs rarely address family engagement as a topic at all. We also see English language learner teachers or department heads are often tasked with playing this role. Again, like immigrant or refugee students also come with trauma that is not well understood at the school level. It just means that the barriers that I mentioned before to family involvement are stuck, or the infrastructure is not in place to address the changes.

Talking points, our vision is to really step into this role, to play the bridge and be a resource for these communities. The way that teachers and families can really connect across language and technological barriers, to see partnerships build, and to see the difference that those partnerships make, is changing mindsets and the way the main channel through which these mindset start change. It's parents knowing that schools are actually welcoming, they invite the parents to be involved and to attend events. It's also changing the mindsets of parents who might have had not such a positive experience with the schools growing up themselves. It's the underlying I think the empowerment and change and perceptions of mindsets that they can work together and it is the fact that it makes a difference.

Steve:

I think it's so important what you mentioned about some... We mentioned before maybe parents not having a lot of experience in American schools or not a lot of experience in education in general, but perhaps people having had bad experiences. How do we bring those people back in and give them a comfortable, happy experience? It sounds like that's part of what you're trying to do.

To add onto that last question and maybe take it to the next level, I posed that question as a challenge. That like, okay, there's a school district, let's say in New Jersey, that has this influx of English language learners. People don't know what to do. Immediately, the mindset of someone is, "This is a huge challenge I have to overcome." My next question is how do you think we go about, from your perspective, changing that idea of a challenge into, "Wow, how wonderful is it that we have students from 20 different countries here," and make it an asset based situation?

Heejae:

I think the reality of the U.S. and the U.S. in all communities across the country is that the country is becoming more diverse. If you think about a community like Napa, so we worked with

Napa County Education. It's something like in grade 12, let's say 30%, 30 to 50% of the students are non-white and mostly Latinos. In the pre-K classrooms it's actually 90%, What that means is 12 years later, if you fast forward, 90% of students will be not white and most likely the families will not be [inaudible 00:14:26]. I think the cultural and the linguistic diversity that a lot of communities are experiencing for the first time would become an asset because it really then prepares for the students for the real life, the increasing diversity of the country. The more they are prepared to work in such environments and situations and know how to culturally translate and work with and be friends with and being a community that is diverse, I think that will be a real life skill, an asset to be had in the workplace or going forward.

Steve:

Yeah, I totally agree with that. I think it's one thing to show people statistics about how the demographics are changing and what the world is going to be like in 20 years. It's another thing to put everybody together in the same room and take advantage of the fact that we have this wonderful diversity. See people working together in novel and innovative ways that will then translate into future success. I think we're starting to see that. The more I think we can share those examples and amplify them, the better off we're going to be.

Heejae:

I think the last piece there is, it should be reframed as an asset. I think it is definitely a challenge, but the quicker and the better prepped that these schools or the communities can be, the more future proof and future ready that they will be.

Steve:

Absolutely. I want to zoom in to some specific anecdotes for lack of a better term. When we spoke first, I hope you remember this, you told me a wonderful story that that serves as an Aha moment about the importance of family engagement. It was centered around a Chick-fil-A in Georgia, which sounds funny, but I think you remember telling me that story. I think it's well worth sharing with listeners because it can really give us a concrete example of how this works. Could you give us a quick summary of that story that you told me?

Heejae:

Yeah, of course. We work with a teacher in Georgia. She is an English language learner teacher at a local elementary school. She shared with us the story, which is heartwarming, so thank you for the opportunity to real tell the story, which I love. She basically goes to Chick-fil-A every other day. It's one of her favorite restaurants. It's very local to the school that she works in. When she started communicating through Talking Points and engaging families of her students in the school, she actually realized that many of the family members and parents of the students, were employees of the Chick-fil-A branch that she goes on.

Without Talking Points, she wouldn't have realized that relationship. I think the story goes that now she goes to the branch and gets a lot of freebies. Without Talking Points, she would not realized that these employees that she interacts on almost a daily basis were actually parents

who I engage in or at least trying to engage in their children's education and closing the loop there. For her to tell the story to her students is also very powerful because for her students, it's almost closing the loop on school and home. Research shows that being able to not having to navigate the school versus home environments. By that I mean really bridging the school and the home for students is actually a critical driver of creating a successful learning environment.

Steve:

Absolutely. I would not have let you left this conversation without telling that story. I just feel like it's such a great example of how technology or a tool or something can help us bring people together and help us, I don't know, I think really not miss opportunities, to connect with one another. When community members and people from the school start to get to know one another, teachers, parents, students, et cetera, everybody benefits.

Heejae:

I think on a big picture level, relationships drive a lot of the motivation. It's also been shown that it drives a lot of student learning, help them learn faster, help them feel more comfortable and yeah.

Steve:

Great. I want to talk a little bit about school and district culture. This is a question that I ask people frequently, it seems no matter what the topic is. In this case we're talking about family engagement and English language learners and a tool that has proven to be very effective to facilitate those relationships. But having worked in a couple of districts myself, I know that that school culture can change, or can be different from district to district. What role or what effect do you think that school culture has on this work, and what adjustments need to be made to school culture in order to make a tool like Talking Points work?

Heejae:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, let me start with examples or the common factors of where we see it work the best. I think school culture often come from school leadership. When school leadership administrators make family involvement a priority, and a priority that is constantly communicated, has metrics around it, that has a plan, then adoption of Talking Points and building relationships, and that transformative school environment where students can learn that works the best. Now in schools where there is a culture of not being able to experiment or try new things, and be comfortable with the fact that this might be a longer term investment, then the upside of Talking Points has frankly been more limited. The reason the increasing partnership and working together with families and helping change those mindsets and building those relationships, it doesn't change overnight. When it comes from the school leaders, we are making an investment into family involvement through Talking Points so that a couple of months down the line or even next school year, we will see a difference. Then that's the cultural shift I think a lot of score administrators need to keep in mind.

Steve:

Another common denominator in most of the conversations that I have is just the crucial importance of effective school leadership and long term planning. I'm glad that you brought that up as well.

Heejae:

Thanks Steve. The last part I would add to this is really thinking of families and parents as partners, and thinking of families being on the same team and on the same page, to get the students to succeed with the same goal. If it's a school culture where family involvement because of certain state or federal regulations, or at least in the case of California with LCAP, which is a state mandate to involve families, which often leads to schools maybe thinking of family involvement as a quote, in quotation marks, checking the box. Then I think the effect or the upside to family involvement has been pretty limited. Really deeply believing in the value is also important, but it's also something that doesn't change overnight.

Steve:

Yeah, that's interesting. I take from that that there's like this two general camps. There's the camp where a state or a district has a policy in place that says you must do these things for family engagement, a compliance piece. There's places where there's not much there, but perhaps it's some really passionate people that are doing that work. Both can cause problems. It can be a check the box thing with compliance. We see that with English language learners in general at times.

Then in the areas where you have just a few people who are really passionate, these rogue folks who are going and doing these things on their own, you have the danger of it not being a systemic program. The common denominator seems to be a culture of understanding, like you said, that parents, if our families in general are going to be partners and must be partners for the success of the students. Do you find that schools in general really understand what effective family engagement looks like or are they looking for a comprehensive solution that you talked about earlier in terms of changing mindsets?

Heejae:

This is an interesting question. Some do. I think some really understand what it looks like and are looking for partners to execute on the plan. Unfortunately, many schools or districts don't necessarily have the capacity to innovate their practices or understand what effective family engagement looks like. The work that we do with our school and district partners is at least be a thought partner to help them think about their family engagement practices and how technology can play a role in it. Especially for the families who cannot make it to events at school because of transportation or childcare issues and logistical constraints.

Now we have also seen where schools and districts come to us essentially for compliance reasons. Then see the effect or the changes that Talking Points has made, or building those relationships and educating the parents has made in classrooms. Which then really transforms

their thinking around, "Oh, actually it's not just a check the box item that we need to do. It actually is transformative and makes a difference in everyday operations."

To give you a very simple but powerful example, one of the schools here in the Bay Area in East Bay, so Oakland Unified is one of our district partners. One school increased the number of field trips that they went on by threefold. The reason being, the biggest constraint in the last couple of years was parent chaperones. But because of Talking Points, because of the relationships being built, they are able to recruit more parent chaperones to go on more field trips and extend and expand the horizons of the students.

Steve:

What a great example. That's something that everyone can see and everyone, more importantly, everyone can feel. Speaking with Stephanie Cuevas in a previous episode who does a lot of work on family engagement at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She actually just defended her PhD thesis recently. One of the things that she was saying was there's all this data that says that family engagement works. But when you go to a school that is doing it right, you just feel it. That came from a really hardcore researcher. To hear her say, "Yeah, a lot of it's research, a lot of it's data, but a lot of it's just feel." I think that's really important. Certainly when you see the parents at field trips and yeah, you collect the data and you see that there's three times as many, but when you see them all together that's going to be a pretty great observation, a pretty great feeling. I'm sure makes you all feel good about the work that you're doing.

Heejae:

Yeah, absolutely. I totally hear you on, you can feel it. You can feel excellence in whatever field I think. You really feel a collaborative, exciting and supportive school environment when you see it done well.

Steve:

Great. I want to transition to some questions about resources that you'd recommend to people as we come to a close here. The first question I want to ask you, and this is always a hard one for people, so I'll warn you, is there a book or any other resource that has had an important influence on you in this work either personally or professionally?

Heejae:

This is a difficult question. The resources that we turned to, you mentioned Karen Mapp at the Harvard Education School earlier. We also look Colorín Colorado, which doesn't necessarily cover Colorado on resources around English language learners. Ultimately the biggest resource we rely on is our own community, our community of educators and families who can give us feedback. The biggest piece of advice, if I may say so, that we have learnt and we have learned in the last few years in doing this work is really listen to the families who often don't necessarily have a voice or feel empowered to demand certain things, but know what the community needs and know what the students need. They just need the channel to voice these opinions and allies

to be able to work on it. I dodged that question a little bit, but the resource would be communities.

Steve:

I don't think you dodged it at all. I think it's totally fair. Maybe I should rephrase the question. I guess I do say resource because that is the most important resource that you have is the people that you're working with. In this case, I imagine that they don't have a lot of outlets to speak with, and they certainly have a lot of knowledge to share.

Heejae:

Right.

Steve:

In closing, I want to make sure that we give you an opportunity to tell folks how they can learn more about your work or get in touch with you at Talking Points or just learn more about the products.

Heejae:

Yeah, absolutely. We have a website, the website address is Talking Points dot O-R-G. It's actually Talking P-T-S dot O-R-G. Anyone listening to this podcast who wants to learn more specifically about the feature work around teacher professional development and parent education can also email me directly at Heejae. That's H-E-E-J-A-E @talkingpts.org.

Steve:

Wonderful. Well with that, I really want to thank you for your time and for sharing some information, not only about what you're doing at Talking Points, But just I think some really valuable information about what it takes to do family engagement well particularly with the English language learners that we both work with pretty frequently. Thanks for taking the time. I look forward to connecting again in the future.

Heejae:

Amazing. Thanks Steve.