Hispanic Parent Involvement and Perspectives in the Education of Their Preschool Child with Developmental Disabilities

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When parent participation is discussed and mandated, it is assumed that it includes parents of children with disabilities from various backgrounds. Yet, questions about how the notions of parent involvement fit or do not fit within certain cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic frameworks need to be asked before assumptions about parent involvement can be generalized. Many factors besides language differences can influence parent-school relationships and parent involvement. A recent study by Sontag and Schacht (1994) examines ethnicity with respect to parent participation and information needs in early intervention programs. In their examination of Native American and Hispanic parent participation, they report a greater need of Hispanic and Native American parents to receive information about how to get services compared to Anglo (non-Hispanic) parents. Another finding showed that fewer parents of minority children (Hispanic and Native American) were engaged in the educational program decision making process as compared to Anglo parents. Furthermore, Native American and Hispanic parents were less likely to give information and support to other parents with similar needs, when compared to non-Hispanic, Anglo parents. Lynch and Stein (1987) also reported differences in parent participation among Hispanic, African American, and Anglo families. These studies indicate a difference in attitude about parent involvement by parents of culturally and linguistically diverse children.

Purpose of Study

Special education services are being provided to preschool children birth to five years of age. The provision of services to such a young group of children demands parent involvement and active participation in their children's special education interventions. Previous studies have indicated that parent involvement has been passive and remains relatively unchanged (Lynch & Stein, 1982). Studies examining parent involvement by culturally and linguistically diverse families further indicate concerns about active involvement. This descriptive study explored preliminary notions about Hispanic parents' views on their involvement, actual participation, and perceptions about their children's early educational experiences. In addition, parents' knowledge and awareness of their rights and the educational rights of their children were probed. Due to the scarcity of research in this area the preliminary findings of the study are expected to provide impetus for further study.
Educational Environments of Children Whose Parents Were Interviewed

The parents selected to participate in the study had children placed in one of five classrooms. All classrooms had at least a 73% Hispanic student population.

**Classroom A:** A bilingual special education teacher and a monolingual regular education teacher team taught children between the ages of three to five in this integrated (regular education and special education) classroom. The teachers were assisted by a bilingual paraprofessional. The teachers used native language instruction and ESL techniques in working with Spanish-speaking children.

**Classroom B:** Children ages three to four attended this traditional self-contained, developmentally disabled (DD) preschool. A monolingual teacher was assisted by a bilingual and a monolingual paraprofessional. Due to the teacher's inability to provide instruction in Spanish, she relied primarily on the bilingual paraprofessional to work with the Spanish-dominant children.

**Classroom C:** A monolingual teacher taught this self-contained DD preschool program attended by children ages two to five. A bilingual and a monolingual paraprofessional assisted the teacher. The majority of the instruction was in English; however, from time to time the bilingual paraprofessional would translate for the Spanish-speaking children.

**Classroom D:** This transitional kindergarten served children ages five to six. The bilingual teacher rarely used Spanish for instructional or communicative purposes in the classroom.

**Classroom E:** This classroom consisted of a combination DD preschool and day care center located in a rural school district. It served children from 15 months to 5 years of age and was taught by a bilingual special education teacher. The primary language of instruction in the classroom was Spanish.

**Participants**

Names and telephone numbers of parents of Hispanic children from the identified classrooms were solicited through school officials from the five cooperating schools. Twenty-six parents signed the Permission to Participate Forms, and their children returned the forms to school. Parents were contacted by telephone or home-visit (for those families who did not have a telephone) by two bilingual interviewers after parent permission slips were received. Of the original twenty-six parents who agreed to be interviewed, two were eliminated due to their lack of commitment in keeping their interview appointments after several unsuccessful attempts had been made. One was eliminated because the interview could not be completed. Three were eliminated because they did not identify themselves as Hispanic. The remaining eighteen (69%) parents were included in the study. Of this total, 16 were biological parents, and 2 were grandparents serving as primary caregivers (legal guardians) of their grandchildren. All parents in this study were Hispanic, with varying educational and experiential backgrounds. With the exception of one family, all had similar socioeconomic backgrounds and could be considered low-income working-class families.

**Parent Interviews**

Bilingual interviewers conducted an in-depth direct interview with parents in their home environment. The questions required yes-no answers as well as open-ended responses. Before the onset of the interview, parents were given a choice of language (Spanish or English) in both receiving and providing information. Eleven chose to have the interview conducted in Spanish, seven chose English. Questions were often repeated several times in a different manner using probing techniques in order to ensure accurate understanding (e.g., Cree usted qué su hijo aprendio mucho en este programa? [Do you think your child has learned much from this program?]). The length of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes.

The second instrument used in the interview was the Home Bilingual Usage Estimate (HBUE) (Skoczylas,
1971). The HBUE took approximately 10 minutes to administer. The primary purpose for using the HBUE was to determine the language used in the home. With the use of the HBUE a better determination was made regarding the linguistic characteristics of the Hispanic families.

**Findings**

Parent information was grouped around five focal areas. Several questions were asked for each of the focal areas. The five focal areas included (a) parent awareness and perceptions about their child's educational program; (b) parent attitudes and views regarding their involvement; (c) parent knowledge about their child's educational program and their legal rights as mandated by either state and/or federal laws; (d) parent expectations of their child's program; and (e) parent expectations concerning instruction as it related to language and culture.

The results of the descriptive data are reported in the form of percentages. The qualitative responses are reported using a *favorable mention* technique, that is, reporting information based on priority and frequency of appearance among all responses.

**Focal Area One: How did Hispanic parents view the education of their young child with disabilities, and were they generally satisfied with the program?**

A primary concern of the study was parents' awareness and perceptions about their child's educational program. Four questions were asked related to this area of concern. They included the following content: (a) whether the parents expected the child to learn much from the program, (b) whether the parents thought their child would benefit from the program in other ways, (c) what the parents liked about the program, and (d) whether they were comfortable with the services their child was receiving.

All but one of the parents who were interviewed were satisfied with their child's program. Their comments about the programs were generally positive in nature. When asked in what other ways their child would benefit from the program, they indicated the areas of social skills development, behavior, and communication. In several instances throughout the interview, parents mentioned their appreciation for the development of their child in social skills areas as well as in other skills developed by ancillary services (physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy).

The parents were generally accepting of any school services made available to them. They refrained from making negative comments about their child's program, the teacher, or the school. Sometimes a concern was voiced as part of another question, and dissatisfaction was expressed indirectly. For example, when asked how she felt about her child going to school at such an early age, a mother responded that her child was too young to go to school and that she was unhappy that her child had to be bussed to a school other than the school her child would attend if the child did not have a disability. Another mother said that she was happy with her child's program, but later said that she wished her child could have more frequent and longer speech therapy sessions.

In continued contacts with some of the families after the initial interview, the parents' trust, confidence, and acceptance of the school remained consistent.

**Focal Area Two: How did Hispanic parents of young children with disabilities perceive their involvement and participation in their child's education?**

Five questions were asked concerning parent involvement:

1. Will you be involved in your child's education this year?

2. How would you like to be involved (school meetings, meetings with teachers in the home, attending
school activities, telephone conferences with teachers, meetings with school personnel/persons involved with
program, helping my child with school work)?

3. In what ways can you participate in your child's educational program?

4. How do you define participation?

5. In what ways, other than school related activities, can you help your child's educational program?

On the questions concerning the parents' willingness to become involved in their child's education, 89% of
the parents responded in the affirmative. Parents not able to participate indicated that they were
overwhelmed. One parent stated that lack of childcare and transportation impeded her involvement in the
schools.

Several choices were given to parents concerning ways in which they would like to be involved. They
included school meetings, meetings with teachers in their home, attending school activities (parties, plays,
etc.), telephone conferences with teachers, special meetings with school personnel involving their child's
program (IEP meeting), and helping their child with schoolwork. Of these choices, the most popular
responses were school meetings and home meetings.

When asked about ways they could participate in the educational program of their child most families
responded that they would prefer home-based activities (i.e., helping with homework, reading to their
children, etc.). Reading to their children was reported as a priority activity by most parents. In some cases
reading to their children was the only activity some parents felt confident doing. This is reflected in one
parent's comment: "No estoy muy capacitada de mas" (I am not capable of helping in any other way.).
Moreover, some parents indicated that they preferred reading Spanish literature because of their higher level
of proficiency in their native language. In some cases it was the only language they knew. One parent
lamented that she did not know enough English to help her child with his schoolwork and that all the work
was in English.

Perhaps the most interesting information concerning parent participation was the parents' definitions of
"participation." Responses ranged from "finding out how my child is doing in school and about his
schoolwork" to "learning whatever I can to help my child at home" (i.e., sign language, special educational
activities, etc.). The majority (74%) of the responses indicated that parents defined participation as helping
the teacher in some way in the classroom. Parents expressed a general desire to do more in the school. A
few parents (16%) indicated that participation meant that they should do things with their child such as
communicate, play, and take them places.

Focal Area Three: Were Hispanic parents of young children with disabilities knowledgeable about their
children's educational program, and were they familiar with their rights as parents and knowledgeable
about their children's educational rights?

When asked whether parents understood the child's educational process, 11 (61%) responded affirmatively,
and 7 (38%) indicated that they did not. In addition, parents were asked if they were familiar with their
child's educational rights and with their rights as parents. Of the 16 who responded to the first half of that
question, 7 (44%) reported that they understood their child's educational rights. Half of the 18 responding to
whether they understood their rights as parents indicated that they did, and half reported that they did not.
Even after probing, parents offered little elaboration on their responses. Some parents reported knowing the
structure and purpose of their child's educational program but did not know about their rights. Some of these
parents expressed that they had gained what information they knew from outside sources such as support
groups and friends. It is not known whether the parents actually knew their rights since a weakness of the
interview was that it did not directly ask parents to relate knowledge of their and their child's rights as they
understood them. One reason for this was that interviewers did not want to make the parents feel ill at ease
if they did not know. Most parents were quiet and reserved. They responded with minimal elaboration to all questions asked. This did not indicate that parents did not feel comfortable talking to the interviewers since they often spent much time chatting with interviewers about family and personal topics. Their reluctance to elaborate on questions asked during the interview may indicate a lack of comfort with school-related subject matter.

When asked whether important educational documents had been provided in their preferred language 44% of the parents requesting Spanish interviews indicated that the documents had been provided in English only. Only 11% of the parents indicated that an interpreter had been available to translate the information orally. It was obvious that these parents did not know their rights concerning obtaining documents in their primary language.

**Focal Area Four: What were Hispanic parents' expectations of their children's educational programs?**

This question showed that parents had much higher interests in related ancillary services (i.e., occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech/language therapy) as compared to specific classroom instructional expectations. Parents expressed a desire for extended speech therapy services in their child's IEP. This could have been due to many of the children in the programs being identified as speech and language impaired. In addition, parents wanted better networking between school and home. Another priority item mentioned was transportation. Some of the parents were distressed that their child had to travel long distances by bus. The teaching of Spanish and cultural values and more time in school were also noted as important expectations of their child's program.

Overall, progress, at any degree, was more than just an expectation; it was highly appreciated. One parent put it this way: "Cuando aprende algo, son los momentos que me hacen llorar de gusto" (When he learns something, I cry with joy.). Another parent expressed her appreciation by stating: "Cuando me trae papeles, me enseña lo que hicieron en la escuela, siempre anda con sus papeles" (When he brings me papers, he shows what was done at school, he always shows me his papers.). Other parents expressed similar responses reflecting pride and appreciation of their child's learning.

**Focal Area Five: What were parents' instructional expectations related to language and culture?**

Perhaps the statement by one parent sums up the general consensus of the great majority of the parents interviewed. With respect to valuation of culture and how it relates to instruction, he stated: "The biggest fear for me about my son's school is that he won't be taught our ways of life." When he was asked to elaborate, he identified culture as an extremely important factor in the process of educational development for his son. All but two interviewees concurred with this young father's statement.

In terms of language, all parents desired instruction to be in both English and Spanish. For the most part, parents associated the mastery of both languages with future opportunity and success. Most parents indicated that they read to their children. In addition, in most cases, parents reported that they read to their children in both languages. The level of education of these parents was irrelevant in terms of language reading preference. These findings are similar to Ortiz's (1992) study of Hispanic parents' involvement in their young children's early literacy development. In his study, Ortiz found that parents were concerned with academic achievement and allocated large chunks of time to reading and writing with their children, particularly in areas related to school work.

Parents expressed the need to teach their children both languages equally. They felt that the teaching of Spanish was a major part of preserving the culture of the children and families. Also, several parents were concerned not so much about the teaching of the children's Hispanic culture in the school but that the culture be respected so their children would not lose it.

When one considers the cultural and linguistic background of the families, it is not surprising that the
parents had such expectations. The HBUE classified the families as follows:

3 (16%) E English monolingual
4 (22%) E/s English dominant
3 (17%) E/S Apparent bilingual
4 (22%) S/e Spanish dominant
4 (22%) S Spanish monolingual

Essentially, the results show that 11 (61%) of the families used 2 languages in the home. Twenty-two % of the families spoke Spanish only.

**Conclusions and Discussion**

With the recent implementation of special education programs serving special education children ages 3-5, this study serves as a preliminary examination of what Hispanic parents might be feeling and thinking about those programs. In addition, some of the longstanding issues related to minority parent participation and awareness of their rights are reexamined from the perspective of Hispanic parents whose children attend preschools for children with developmental disabilities.

Parents expressed a general acceptance of their child's educational program. They were reluctant to criticize or to suggest in any way that they were not happy with the program. As in other studies, the parents were quite willing to accept what the professionals provided for their child in the schools. According to Harry (1992) minority parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds may not feel that they can make suggestions and recommendations in their child's educational program. Working class parents may feel they have less individual power and may only be able to express views concerning changes when they can do it with a group of other parents. In addition, knowing what suggestions they could effectively make is a learned skill which many minority parents may not have had an opportunity to acquire. In order to make suggestions about what they would like to see in their child's special education program, parents would need to know about the realm of special education services. They would need to know the individuals to approach in making suggestions. Ultimately, they need to have the confidence that suggestions they make will be listened to and validated in some way. Parents will not be able to participate in this manner without some sense of empowerment. Harry (1992) states that trust, respect, deference, and withdrawal can make collaboration with parents very difficult for special educators who do not understand how these factors influence parent interactions with them.

The main expectation expressed by parents about their child's educational program was the provision of more speech therapy and other ancillary services. Parents also wanted their child's educational programs to reflect the home language and culture. Sixty-one percent of the families included in the study used both languages in the home environment, and Spanish was the only language used by 22 percent. The families desired to have the children's school experience not conflict with their home experience and hoped that their children would not lose their home culture. They were not as concerned about having teachers teach about Hispanic culture as with having teachers respect and understand it. Often educators are under the impression that language and cultural aspects are not important to minority families. The focus of instruction in English only and the primary reflection of mainstream culture in the classroom is often seen as particularly important to special education learners who have a disability that can affect learning. Monolingual and monocultural instruction is seen as less confusing for students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Baca and Cervantes (1989) contend that bilingual/bicultural instruction is necessary and most appropriate for children with disabilities. Only through such instruction can children progress from the known to the unknown. Using their strongest language as a medium for instruction and
incorporating instruction within a cultural context that is familiar to them facilitates learning for students with disabilities.

Parents in this study were quite involved in their children's education especially in the home. While they expressed a desire to participate in the classroom, some parents felt overwhelmed with other responsibilities or had obstacles such as lack of transportation and childcare which interfered with such involvement. These findings are in keeping with other studies which have examined minority parent involvement (Harry, 1992).

The area of parental involvement in school-based activities needs to be explored in more depth. Less involvement in their children's school program (e.g., Individualized Education Plan) may be the result of the parents' geographic isolation or an avoidance of authority figures (Grossman, 1995), particularly for families living in rural areas. Grossman suggests that parents as tutors or volunteers within the classroom can act as support groups, hold rapport sessions, and identify resources that enable them to devote more time to their children's academic growth. Another area for further research is the role of the school district in attempts to include parents in information sharing and the identification of resources through regularly held meetings with teachers and other school personnel (Alper, Schloss, & Schloss, 1994).

Sixty-one percent of the parents indicated that they understood their child's educational process; however, they gave mixed responses about their understanding of their rights as parents and the educational rights of their children. Forty-four percent of the parents requesting Spanish interviews did not receive important documents in their preferred language. Only 11% of those individuals received assistance in translating those documents by an interpreter. These findings indicate that a large percentage of the Spanish dominant parents were not being adequately informed about their child's education or provided with information so they could make informed decisions. This situation is a serious violation of what EAHCA and IDEA have attempted to ensure. Without the most basic and fundamental rights of informed consent, how can schools expect full participation by parents? School personnel cannot live under the illusion that they are doing everything they need to do to involve culturally and linguistically diverse families and that it is the families who are not responding. School personnel need to examine their role in noninvolvement by minority parents.

While the number of parents included in this study precludes generalizations based on the findings, the findings nonetheless provide some insight that might be helpful to educators working with Hispanic parents and their young children with special needs. A major implication of this preliminary investigation is that more studies are needed to promote better understanding of these families and their needs.

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