

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: Exploring Parent Perspectives on American Education

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ABSTRACT

The United States has seen a growing number of Latinx, and half are of school-age. With the increasing numbers of Latinx students, it becomes essential to understand parent perspectives, feelings, and issues faced in order to be inclusive of and culturally responsive when working with diverse learners. This study utilized semi-structured interviews to identify Latinx parent perceptions on their child's education in public educational institutions (K-postsecondary). This study results in Latinx parent perceptions on education, challenges, and messages for educators when working with Latinx child/children and their families. Themes include a difference in values, challenging factors, and cultural awareness knowledge. Understanding diverse views and possible challenges, may help educators integrate culturally responsive practices when working with Latinx students.

Keywords: Culturally responsive, Latinx students, parent perceptions

INTRODUCTION

The Latinx population is the largest and fastest-growing immigrant group in the United States and continues to rise with nearly 60 million Latinx, accounting for over 50% population growth within a decade (Pew Research, 2019). One-third of the United States' Latinx population growth has occurred in the Southern states

that include but are not limited to Texas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Florida, Georgia, Virginia, and Alabama. Nearly half of the Latinx population is under the age of 24 (Garcia-Reid et al., 2015; Pew Research, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). According to the United States Census Bureau (2017), over 50 million students are enrolled in K-12 schools. At the K-12 level, Latinx students account for a quarter of the student enrollment. At the postsecondary level, Latinx students account for nearly 20% of the student enrollment (U.S. Census, 2018). By 2022, an increase of Latinx high school graduates will increasingly affect postsecondary admissions and enrollment (Santiago, 2011). By 2060, this population is expected to rise to over 100 million (U.S. Census, 2017).

Many Latinx youth reside in communities where support and opportunities are limited (Noguera, 2004). Significant numbers of Latinx youth live in poverty, have limited pre-school educational access, and face barriers negatively impacting educational outcomes (Alvarez de Davila & Michaels, 2016). Parental education, language, documentation, and additional support factors further impact academic achievement (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2009). Additionally, Latinx parents' lack of knowledge of their child's education becomes a challenge as well (Garcia-Reid et al., 2015).

This study uses the term Latinx throughout to encompass Latina/o and Hispanic populations. Educators may perceive Latinx youth as "deficit-oriented" believing that their culture, home, or community negatively affect their outcomes (Medina et al., 2015). As an educator, both in an urban school district and as an adjunct professor, I often advocate for students and believe in utilizing culturally responsive practices in teaching. Over the years I have seen first-hand the increasing numbers of Latinx students in school systems and the lack of voice Latinx parents have in expressing their concerns and thoughts at the school level. Working with Latinx organizations and partners, I wanted to provide Latinx parents with this opportunity to share their voices.

Some of the values that many immigrant Latinx families hold significant include a sense of respect and holding strong family ties (Gonzalez et al., 2013). Considering parents and their values in the educational realm becomes essential in serving students and families. Hence, utilizing qualitative methodology, the purpose of this study is to explore Latinx parent perspectives on public educational institutions in the United States. In learning of Latinx parent perspectives and challenges, the study serves as a way of countering the "deficit-oriented" view of Latinx parents. Please note that this study was conducted in one region of a Southeastern state within the United States. The end goal is two-fold. One, the hope that educators and educational institutions understand and implement what is needed for Latinx students and their families. And two, to view parent perceptions as a positive way in facilitating communication and understanding students'

backgrounds. Much of the latter lies within the framework of culturally responsive practices, especially in understanding and engaging with parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior studies have focused on Latinx parents, including parent involvement (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2012; Lopez, 2001; Trumbull et al., 2001; Zarate, 2007), parent perceptions on post-secondary education (McCallister et al., 2010), as well as parent engagement (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Hill & Torres, 2010). Additionally, studies have documented barriers for Latinx parents such as a lack of understanding when it comes to policies/practices (Villalba et al., 2007), lack of materials in Spanish or presence of Spanish-speaking interpreter (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004), and in providing academic support (Henry et al., 2011). It becomes important to understand that Latinx families with economic, linguistic, or cultural barriers can find it challenging to navigate and/or participate in the educational system. This is especially true of Latinx immigrant families who exhibit more significant needs while adapting to their new environment (Gonzalez et al., 2013).

“How we teach, what we teach, how we relate to children and each other, what our goals are—these are rooted in the norms of our children” (Pai et al, 2006, p. 233). The current study utilized culturally responsive teaching, a pedagogical framework. Currently multiple frameworks exist. For this study, the focus will be on Gloria Ladson-Billings, Geneva Gay, and Sydney Snyder and Diane Staehr Fenner.

Ladson-Billings (1994) introduced the term to capture a form of pedagogy to engage underrepresented students. Ladson-Billings (1994) originally defined culturally responsive teaching as “a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students’ cultural references in every aspect of learning” (p. 29). She challenged the aspect of change – change in the way educators practice, how students engage, and how culture and curriculum connect. Culturally responsive practices Ladson-Billings (2009) Culturally relevant practices include honoring and respecting students’ home culture and viewing parents/families as having potential and power (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Though her work revolved around African American students, her insight paved the way in incorporating culture within the class and school community. Ladson-Billings shared “culturally relevant pedagogy urges collective action grounded in cultural understandings, experiences and ways of knowing of the world” (p. 202).

Geneva Gay (2000; 2010) built upon this work, creating a framework for culturally responsive teaching. This framework was designed so teachers could build a bridge of understanding between students’ culture and learning. Culturally

responsive teaching is multidimensional and validates culture. In order to include students' cultural references, we must know our students and the cultural backgrounds they come from. Thus, culture is vital in shaping relationships with one another and students' academic goals (Gay, 2018). Gay (2018) stated, "Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches *to and through* the strengths of these students" (p. 36-37). Culturally responsive teaching acknowledges students' knowledge, beliefs, and values while honoring students' racial/ethnic and cultural diversity. It enhances the legitimacy of cultural groups and empowers representation. Culturally responsive teaching is transformative in nature and its foundation lies in multicultural contributions, interactions, and experiences.

Sydney Snyder and Diane Staehr Fenner (2021) continue to build upon this framework by guiding principles for supporting multilingual learners through culturally responsive practices. Snyder and Fenner (2021) define multilingual learners as "students whose parent or guardian reports speaking one or more languages other than English at home" (p. 2). Snyder and Fenner (2021) view culturally responsive practice as an essential aspect of multilingual learners' education. Their guiding principles include viewing culturally responsive teaching as asset-based approach, supporting and challenging learners, focusing on student-centered learning, empowering students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and strengthening the school-family-community network. In contrast to the "deficit-oriented" lens discussed above, these guiding principles value both students' home languages and cultures as a way to build upon students' prior knowledge. Additionally, they respect and honor the experiences brought into the school community (Snyder & Fenner, 2021).

If education is intended to serve its students, then educators must teach reflecting upon the population it serves. Implementing culturally responsive practices assist students in achieving their true potential (Gay, 2018). One key characteristic of culturally responsive teaching is developing a positive perspective on parents and families. This study focuses on this component. Partnering with, learning about and from parents, and involving parents are essential in working with students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Neito, 1996). Moll, Amanti, et al. (1992) suggest that educators find ways to understand parents' thoughts, concerns, and suggestions when it comes to their children. Snyder and Fenner (2021) conclude that when culturally responsive practices engage multilingual parents/families, it can build trust and a sense of belonging.

Working in an urban school district, I continue to advocate for culturally responsive practices. As our classrooms continue to become more diverse and our

student demographics continue to change, culturally responsive teaching allows us as educators this flexibility to create inclusive, welcoming learning environments. I imbibe culturally responsive teaching as a practitioner and see the impacts it can have on our students and families within school communities. It was essential for me to see how the key component of relationships with and input from parents sheds light on this study.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative phenomenological study focused on semi-structured interviews with Latinx parents with children enrolled in K-postsecondary educational institutions in the United States. Semi-structured interview is a data collection method involving open-ended questions, allowing participants to fully express themselves as well as allows for follow-up questions as needed (Bernard, 1988). The phenomenological approach is appropriate in understanding participants' comparable experiences (Creswell, 2007). Participants were asked how they perceived education and success in American educational institutions, identified challenges experienced, and shared any messages they may have with educators.

Phenomenological research can be traced by to Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl was a German philosopher who introduced the lived experience. Thus, the phenomenon lies in the individuals experience (Moustaka, 1994; Patton, 2002). This study as indicated previously was a qualitative phenomenological study consisting of semi-structured participant interviews. As such, the researcher is the tool for data collection and the researcher's role is discussed (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). As the researcher supposed an ontological and epistemological assumption, the researcher collected various forms of evidence and relied on multiple individual subjective perspectives to form a representativeness (Creswell, 2007). Participant interviews were transcribed, and shared statements were highlighted to capture the crux of parent perspectives.

Participants

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling from non-profit, community organizations working with Latinx parents. A total of eight parents participated in the study originating from the following nations: Mexico, Costa Rica, Bolivia, and Cuba. Most of the participants have resided within the United States for an average of 13 years, ranging from a minimum of five to 22 years. Parental education varied: from parents with less than a fifth-grade level education to those who completed some years of postsecondary education. Each participants'

child either attends/has attended an urban public school or college; their child is/will be a first-generation college student. Data was collected from participants within two non-profit settings. A Spanish/English interpreter was present for participants who were not comfortable communicating in English or fluent in English.

RESULTS

In this qualitative study, Latinx parent participants shared their experiences in working with their children's educational institutions. At the center of participant lived experiences enveloped common themes. These themes included differences in values, challenges, and messages for educators.

Participants defined a successful education as one where home and school is seen as a positive partnership: where students gain academic knowledge in content areas and side-by-side learn values allowing them to become positive members of society. Participants believed that learning about one's culture happens at home while academic learning should happen within a student's educational environment. Participants also believe that the educational institution should provide opportunities such as extracurricular activities, educational materials, food, as well as field trips. Finally, they want to see their child/children succeed. The caveat is that success was defined as of obtaining a college or university degree, and with social interaction and being a vital part of the community. *"School is like second home. It's a partnership with two different houses – school and home. Parents also need reinforcement from them when it comes to their kids."*

Participants identified a clash of values (family versus individual) between their home culture and the culture here in the United States. The home culture is where they felt high regard for values whereas American culture was identified as more independent. *"They just don't care about others as much here."* They identified culture within American educational institutions as more academic and content focused, and less about valuing or working with others. *"Aspects of respect, empathy, compassion, interpersonal skills are often not learned in school."* These are the values that participants wished each educational institution would integrate into their classes and/or general education courses. *"Values are important. We value family, unity, and culture."* A combination of knowledge of academics plus these aspects (mentioned above) are seen as values that define success and education.

Latino parents identified a number of challenging factors when working with educational institutions, both K-12 and post-secondary. One of these included discrimination, harassment and bullying. A second factor included a lack of

language proficiency. And a third factor discussed was a lack of understanding different processes/programs.

Parents believed the lack of language proficiency serves as the most frequent target for discrimination and bullying. This included bullying among and between peer groups as well as bullying from administrative staff. *“One adult said I believe you are not from here. Where is your social security? You know that I can call immigration on you and your whole family. My daughter wasn’t afraid for herself but for me.”* In the educational environment, participants believed that because their children did not speak English as well as native English speakers, this impacted how their children were treated and the assumptions, made. *“Some kids may be taught at home bullying is wrong but for others this may need to be taught at school. Home and school partnership needed.”* As a parent, they were unsure of how to approach the issue or how to advocate for their child’s safety if their child/children would not advocate for themselves. In this sense they were unaware of bullying prevention materials available through the educational institution, its lack of translated materials in Spanish, and whom to contact or what steps to take when it occurred. In many cases parents mentioned that they were unsure and not familiar with organizational charts or the process involved in contacting administration.

At the school level, parents believed that language interpretation was often available for their child and only if their child was in a school with an English as a Second Language program. At the postsecondary level, participants shared how their child is often not aware of all the available services and opportunities. In addition, parents hoped for parent orientations with Spanish/English interpreters present. In both K-12 and post-secondary, parents felt a lack of access to interpretation existed. *“This lack of interpretation makes it very difficult for us to be actively engaged.”*

Equally, participants found it difficult to understand policies and procedures. This constituted enrollment processes, policies and information regarding various programs, and application information and procedures. In addition, they found that there was no consistency in sharing the information when and if it was distributed.

So, what do Latinx parents wish to share with educators and educational institutions in general? One repeated message was to provide programs and cultural awareness among staff, be patient, understand the students as well as the parents and their needs, and integrate life skills and character education into courses/curricula.

Participants referred to culture awareness as cultural events, diversity trainings, and cultural competence. *“Its important to understand the different cultures but the cultural background of the children because they [the students]*

are bi-cultural.” Participants felt that there needed to be a consistent approach in integrating cultural events at all educational institutions not just some. Additionally, they thought that these events needed to occur at various timings. *“Events are during work. I almost never participate because I have two jobs.”* Finally, they believed that Spanish classes required them to share more cultural diversity. *“If a person speaks Spanish this doesn’t mean they are all from Mexico. Kids need to learn about different cultures.”*

Understand that the parents want to help but cannot always help with homework. *“I cried every night ... lots of problems with homework. I don’t have school so I could not help. Grades were very low and I was desperate.”* Due to language proficiency and/or the educational level, parents cannot always assist their children. *“Be patient and understanding. Be welcoming.”* Additionally, participants were equally grateful for individuals who chose to be in the educational realm. *“Thank you for educating my child. What you do is extremely hard. It is honored.”* Most of the participants revered those in the education profession.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In order to fill the home-school dichotomy, educational institutions can provide parents with orientation sessions on various topics such as, handling inquiries and complaints, conflict resolution, and in understanding children’s developmental ages. Additional recommendations include the presence of an interpreter at orientations/family nights and translated documents and flyers posted on campus as well as sent home. Holding workshops on technology so parents can maintain communications with their child and their educational institution at hand would benefit both home and school communities. Parental engagement in children’s education aligns with positive outcomes, especially among underrepresented students (Barnett, 2004). There are many ways parents can be involved, engaged, and take part in their children’s education. Parents can provide insight that as educators we may miss. Equally, as educators, our understanding of students, their home life, and their culture/background can increase.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the outcome of this study, we can learn many things from parents if we allow their voices to be heard. Parents are a significant factor in children obtaining academic success, therefore it makes sense to learn from and develop a relationship with them. This study confirms parents are willing to share their knowledge and want to provide input. As educators, if we practice culturally responsive teaching

and include the parent perspective, we can understand cultural nuances causing the loss of student achievement. Hence, I leave you with a few takeaways. One, we do not all define success the same way. For some of us it may be a diploma or degree but for others it success includes involvement within the community. Two, various cultures bring to the table their experiences, values, and perspectives. What one may value another may not. It becomes important that both school and home members are clear on expectations and have the opportunity to engage, learn, and add input. Three, all those interviewed for this study were proud of their individual Latinx heritage and background. They wanted their children to embrace their origins/customs as well as learn of the American culture. Finally, diversity within Latinx cultures spans across various nations. Get to know individual families, their cultural backgrounds, and provide access for them to learn about the institutions (policies, practices, procedures).

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