

Comparing Special Education Experiences Among
Spanish- and English-Speaking Parents of Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

Due to systemic barriers, Spanish-speaking (versus English-speaking) parents of children with disabilities are less likely to participate in educational decision-making. However, little research has directly compared special education experiences between both populations. The purpose of this study was to explore the differences and similarities between Spanish-speaking ($n = 12$) and English-speaking ($n = 44$) parents of children with disabilities. Specifically, six focus groups were conducted in either English or Spanish in two states. There were three main findings: exacerbated negative experiences (e.g., disempowerment and lack of teacher knowledge) for Spanish-speaking (versus English-speaking) parents, unique communication barriers among Spanish-speaking families and shared barriers among English- and Spanish-speaking parents. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Comparing Special Education Experiences Among Spanish- and English-Speaking Parents of Children with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, the federal special education law) requires parent participation. For example, IDEA requires parents to give consent for: evaluations, initial special education services and placement. IDEA specifically states that the education of children with disabilities can be improved by “strengthening the role and responsibilities of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school” (2004). Notably, high-quality family-school partnerships have a positive and significant effect on student achievement (Papay & Bambara, 2014).

Unfortunately, there are significant disparities in parent involvement in special education with respect to racial and linguistic backgrounds. For example, barriers include lack of qualified interpreters (Cavendish & Connor, 2018) and access to materials in Spanish (Francis et al., 2018). In addition, Latino (versus White) families are significantly more likely to face stigma and discrimination from school personnel (Author, submitted). Although the systemic barriers affecting Latino families have been documented, little is known about differences in their: special education experiences, parent-school communication, and desired changes to special education. Thus, the purpose of this study was to compare the perceptions and experiences of Spanish and English-speaking parents of children with disabilities. By better understanding such similarities and differences among Spanish and English-speaking families, we can create culturally responsive interventions and practices to improve special education.

Most of the extant literature about the special education process has only examined the perceptions of English-speaking parents of children with disabilities (Burke, 2012). English-

speaking parents of children with disabilities report struggling to navigate the special education system due to a lack of familiarity with the special education regulations and feelings of being overwhelmed by special education jargon (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Similarly, Spanish-speaking families face multiple, unique barriers during the special education process, exacerbated by their circumstances. Spanish-speaking parents often denote language as a barrier (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Francis et al., 2018). The language barrier includes: not receiving special education documents in their native language and being unable to communicate with their child's teacher without a translator. In addition to feeling disrespected by school professionals (Francis et al., 2018), Spanish-speaking parents may also experience racism and discrimination by their child's teachers and therapists (Angell & Solomon, 2017). Although English-speaking and Spanish-speaking families face barriers affecting their family-school partnerships, there is little research directly comparing the perceptions and experiences between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking families. By directly comparing experiences, we can identify overlapping experiences as well as differences.

Parent-school communication is essential in achieving optimal learning outcomes for children with disabilities (Haines et al., 2017). In general, parents of children with disabilities want frequent and high-quality parent-school communication (Azad, Wolk, & Mandell, 2018). However, there may be specific barriers among Spanish-speaking families with respect to parent-school communication. Specifically, teachers often do not: offer information in Spanish (Cavendish & Connor, 2018) or provide special education background information necessary to inform parents of services (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018; Correa-Torres & Zebehazy, 2014). Unfortunately, little research has directly compared parent-school communication among

Spanish-speaking and English-speaking families of children with disabilities; without direct comparisons, it is difficult to identify distinct barriers with respect to language.

Because parents are experts on their children with disabilities, their input in the special education process is essential. When IDEA is reauthorized, the Office of Special Education Programs solicits input from stakeholders, including parents of children with disabilities. However, in the most recent reauthorization (2004), less than 3% of the input was from individual parents (York, 2004). Although the input was not de-aggregated by language, the research about unique and exacerbated barriers (e.g., Hirano, Rowe Lindstrom, & Chan, 2018; Francis et al., 2018) among linguistically diverse families suggests that there may be differences in desired changes to special education with respect to linguistic background.

Given the growing population of Latino students with disabilities and their families (U.S Census Bureau, 2016), it is critical to identify similarities and differences in experiences among English- and Spanish-Speaking parents of children with disabilities. By identifying similarities, we can target shared barriers for intervention. By extrapolating barriers specific to Spanish-speaking families, we can develop culturally responsive interventions, practices for promoting family-school partnerships and parent training programs. Thus, the research questions for this study were: Among English- and Spanish-speaking parents of children with disabilities, what are the similarities and differences regarding: special education experiences, parent-school communication, and desired changes to special education policy (i.e., IDEA)?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 56 parents of children with disabilities; all participants resided in Tennessee or Illinois. Of the 44 English-speaking families, 51% identified as African

American ($n = 28$), 22% ($n = 12$) as White and 2% ($n = 1$) as “other”. Notably, three of the English-speaking participants did not report their ethnicity. All Spanish-speaking participants ($n = 12$) were Latino. To be included in this study, participants needed to: be the parent of a child with a disability, participate in the 6 hr civic engagement program, and be willing to complete research activities, including the focus group and a demographic survey. See Table 1.

Recruitment

Information about the study was distributed through the Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) and disability support groups and agencies in two states. A recruitment flyer was also shared via social media. All recruitment materials were available in English and Spanish. Participants received a \$10 gift card for completing the focus group; they received another \$10 gift card upon completing the member checking.

Procedures

Institutional Review Board approval was secured for this study. Before participating in a six hr civic engagement program, participants completed a demographic survey and focus group. Then, participants were offered the civic engagement program in English or Spanish. The first author developed the program and trained PTI personnel to conduct the program (for more information about the program, see Author, 2014). The civic engagement program included information regarding: IDEA reauthorizations, potential changes to IDEA and approaches to advocate for systemic change.

Measures

Demographic survey. The demographic survey was used to collect information about the participants and their children. The survey took 20-25 min to complete.

Focus group protocol. The focus group protocol (see Appendix A) was developed based

on the literature about: advocacy (Trainor, 2010); family-school partnerships (Summers et al., 2005); special education experiences (Shapiro et al., 2004; Cohen, 2013); and family-school communication (Esquivel et al., 2008). The protocol was piloted in English and Spanish with parents of children with disabilities to evaluate its validity. Minor changes were made based on the pilot including re-wording questions. Further, PTI employees reviewed the protocol for content validity. The focus group protocol included six open-ended questions and a series of probes. During each focus group, the authors followed-up with participants as necessary to expand upon their experiences and perceptions (e.g., “Can you tell me more about that advocacy experience?”).

Data Analysis

The focus group data were analyzed by the authors. The third and fourth authors are Latina and native Spanish-speakers. The first author is the parent of a child with a disability and has her PhD in special education. The second author has his PhD in special education and has a sibling with a disability. All analyses were completed using the focus group transcripts and field notes after the transcripts had been translated. All focus groups conducted in Spanish were transcribed and back-translated. First, we independently read the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data (Tesch, 1990). Then, independently, we used constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and emergent coding (Patton, 2002) to code the transcripts in English. Using a line-by-line approach, we examined each piece of data (i.e., each line) and compared it with other data. Each piece of data was highlighted and notated with a phrase. If the data represented a single concept or idea, it was given a code; if the data represented a previously identified code, it was identified with the same code. A line may have multiple codes if the line included multiple concepts or ideas. We then met to discuss our coding. We compared codes,

resolved differences, and developed a codebook. We independently returned to the data; using the codebook, we re-analyzed the interview data. We met to discuss and compare the codes. Lastly, we grouped the codes into categories and organized categories into themes, grounded in the data. After the second-level member checks were completed, we read each transcript again to confirm the categories and ensure that the codes were accurate. After confirming the codes, we focused on the broader categories and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

For example, regarding participant perspectives about special education experiences, we first developed a list of codes. Altogether, there were 77 codes. Codes included: translation issues, self-education, and intimidation by professionals. After confirming the codes, we created broader categories and themes by clustering related codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, we developed the following categories: delay of services, lack of qualified translators or interpreters, and parent advocacy. Then, we examined the categories to identify overlap and grouped the categories into themes: lack of educational services, disempowerment, language barrier, and lack of teacher training.

Codes, categories and themes were created independently for the English and Spanish focus groups. Once themes were established, all themes were compared between the two groups. Through an iterative discussion, we determined the similarities and differences in themes across the English and Spanish focus groups. Themes for both English and Spanish focus groups were selected based on their frequency. All themes are presented in the findings.

Trustworthiness

To establish credibility, this study met several of the quality indicators for trustworthiness (Brantlinger et al., 2005). For example, member checks were employed after data analysis to confirm the accuracy of participants' views. Specifically, a two-level member check was

employed. Regarding the first level member check, at the end of each focus group, the facilitator summarized what was discussed to member check their initial impressions. For the second level member check, after transcribing the focus group, we created a summary of the focus group. The summary was sent to each participant who was asked to confirm, add, change, or delete anything in the summary; none of the participants requested changes to the summary of the focus groups. Notably, we listened to the audio-taped recordings of each focus group. Detailed notes of the participants during the focus groups were used to further ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Thus, the field notes were triangulated with the focus group findings to ensure their accuracy. Last, we identified and shared our potential biases with one another during weekly team meetings. For example, we continually reflected on our biases and how such biases may affect data analysis using peer debriefing.

Findings

There are three main findings of this study. Each finding included both similarities and differences between Spanish- and English-speaking families.

Experiences among Spanish and English-Speaking Families

Similarities.

Lack of educational services. Spanish- and English-speaking participants reported lacking school services including: educational opportunities, speech therapy, and applied behavior analysis. An English-speaking grandparent of a child with multiple disabilities in Tennessee expressed her concerns about inadequate services offered to her child. She stated, “The speech, I think they need to give him a little more than the 30 minutes once a month. . . I really think that they need to do that a little bit more.” Other participants described that

appropriate services were not included in their children's individualized education programs (IEPs). A Spanish-speaking parent in Illinois stated,

Ellos [la escuela] prefieren negar un servicio o muchas veces, no quieren dar el apoyo que nuestros niños necesitan.

They [the school] prefers to deny a service or, many times, they do not want to give the support.

In addition, a Spanish-speaking mother in Tennessee reported that school personnel refused to provide needed services:

Ella [la maestra] la pone a jugar con plastilina allí sentada. Yo no quiero que me la cuiden. Yo quiero que le enseñen lo que no puedo enseñarle. Yo fácilmente puedo pagar una niñera y no traerla a la escuela.

She [the teacher] puts her to play with Playdoh and [so she is just] sitting there. I do not want her to be taken care of [babysat]. I want you to teach her what I cannot teach her. I can easily pay a babysitter and not bring her to school.

Differences.

Lack of teacher training. Spanish-speaking (versus English-speaking) parents reported concerns about limited disability or special education knowledge among teachers, as well as a lack of professional skills. Spanish-speaking participants reported that teachers were not well-versed in instructional strategies and were rude to families. Regarding the former, Spanish-speaking participants reported that general and special education teachers lacked skills and knowledge to teach their children. A Spanish-speaking participant from Tennessee stated:

La maestra regular [educación general] no sabe cómo trabajar con un niño con discapacidad...y no quieren decir 'necesito ayuda' o 'no sé'.

The regular [general education] teachers do not know how to work with a child with a disability . . . and they do not want to say ‘I need help’ or ‘I do not know’.

In addition, some Spanish-speaking participants reported that teachers were unprofessional. A Spanish-speaking mother of a child with autism reported that teachers were unprofessional. When probed further, she reported that the school professionals discriminated against her child with autism; in addition, she reported that school professionals were not forthcoming with sharing information. She shared:

El ultimo día [en el calendario escolar] tenia el programa de Kindergarten. Y luego le pregunté a la maestra [sobre la graduación de Kindergarten], dos semanas antes, "¿qué es esto?" Ella dijo: "Te lo diré más adelante". Y luego le pregunté, luego le pregunté de nuevo, y le envié un mensaje, un correo electrónico que nunca me dijo. . . Un día antes [de la graduación] le pregunto a la maestra y ella dijo 'él no participará', y me sorprende esto. . . Lloré y lloré. . .

The last date [in the school calendar] said Kindergarten program. And then I asked the teacher [about the Kindergarten graduation], two weeks before, ‘What is this?’ She said ‘I’ll tell you later’. And then I asked her, then I asked her again, and I sent her a message, an email, she never told me. . . One day before [the graduation] I ask the teacher and she said ‘He will not participate [in the kindergarten graduation]’, and I am shocked by this. . . I cried and I cried...

This parent went on to report that, instead of allowing her child with autism to participate in the kindergarten graduation, the school provided a pool party for only the students with disabilities, excluding them from their peers.

Disempowerment. Spanish- speaking (versus English- speaking) families reported disempowerment. Many English-speaking participants shared experiences of being empowered, asserting their rights at school, and “fighting” for services. For example, an English-speaking parent from Illinois shared:

I am the expert and I had to believe that 100 percent. ... I unequivocally understood that I am the expert...I recognized that once I made that mind shift and I understood that [I am an expert] as the absolute truth, everything else became relative.

English-speaking parents reported being more empowered, willing, and ready to “fight” for services. Conversely, Spanish-speaking parents reported struggling to voice their concerns and enacting their rights due to systemic barriers. A Spanish-speaking mother in Tennessee shared feeling disempowered when communicating her concerns to the school: “... cuando empiezan atacar todos a veces me hacen temblar. Me hacen temblar. (when they [school personnel] all start attacking at once [during meetings], they make me tremble. They make me tremble).”

In addition, some Spanish-speaking participants reported not advocating due to a fear of retaliation. A Spanish-speaking mother of a child with autism from Illinois reported,

Me puse de peleonera y no me resultó porque...no tienes que ponerte en contra de ella [la maestra] porque la que va a pagar la consecuencias es la niña porque esta en su poder de ella [maestra].

I became a fighter and it did not result well for me, because you do not have to be against her [the teacher] because the one who is going to pay the consequences is the girl [her daughter], because it is in her [teacher’s] power.

Parent-School communication among Spanish and English-speaking families

Similarities. Spanish- and English-speaking families reported concerns about: lack of communication, limited teacher knowledge, and a power differential.

Lack of communication. Spanish and English-speaking participants desired regular and ongoing communication about their children’s academic performance; yet, such communication often did not occur. A Spanish-speaking participant from Tennessee reported, “Todos los días, si es bueno o malo, quiero comunicación. (Every day, if it’s good or bad, I want communication).” Another Spanish-speaking participant, from Tennessee similarly reported:

Deje que ella [el personal de la escuela] me dé la notificación de un logro de mi hija. O por el contrario, si es malo, hablamos de cómo vamos a corregir el problema. Pero no, en cambio, llego a la escuela [y dicen] 'Buenos días', y ahora (señala con sus manos).

Let her [school personnel] give me the notification of an achievement of my daughter. Or, on the contrary, that if it is bad then we talk about how we are going to correct the problem. But no, instead, I get to the school [and they say] ‘Good morning’, and now (waves with her hands).

Similarly, an English-speaking father of two children with disabilities from Illinois stated, “They [school personnel] need to do more communication with the parents about what mainstreaming is, why it’s necessary, what the accommodation means.” In addition, another English-speaking mother from Illinois also stated, “A lot of questions I ask, she [teacher] wouldn’t even respond.”

Educator’s lack of knowledge in communicating with families. Some participants reported that educators had insufficient knowledge about teaching children with disabilities. Spanish-speaking participants from Tennessee stated:

Parent A: Mira, no están adecuadamente educados para los niños. Ellos [el personal de la escuela] no acepta que están equivocados

Parent B: Okay. Yo estoy de acuerdo con ella...

Parent A: Look, they [school personnel] are not properly educated for the children. They do not accept that they are wrong...

Parent B: Okay. I agree with her...

An English-speaking participant from Tennessee expressed that school professionals did not have sufficient knowledge to answer her questions about special education services. She stated:

I recently talked to the special ed teacher who didn't know what the alternate diploma was. She had no idea what that was, I was sharing information on that with her and she was like 'this is great'... I was like oh my gosh.

Power differential. Participants reported being relegated to passive roles with the school. Specifically, participants reported that the school made unilateral decisions without including parent input. For example, an English-speaking participant from Tennessee stated:

You know, sometimes, those kinds of conversations happen where parents are bullied and force you to have to medicate your child. 'You have to do this. You have to do this.' Instead of it being a conversation, it's a demand or request.

A participant from Illinois reported being terrified of communicating with the school because of the power imbalance: "I was really scared at first because they're the person in authority."

Differences. Spanish (vs. English-speaking) families reported concerns about: language barrier and racism.

Language barrier. Only Spanish-speaking participants reported facing a language barrier when communicating with school professionals which resulted in lack of services. In addition, when Spanish-speaking participants attempted to provide input during IEP meetings, their suggestions were dismissed. For example, Spanish-speaking parents in Tennessee reported:

Padre A: Llego a la escuela y [dicen] 'Buenos días' ... solo entiendo dos o tres palabras de lo que me dijeron y luego busco a mis hijos para que me ayuden o me ayuden a hacer preguntas

Padre B: Pero todas escuelas [de educación] general debería tener maestros de ESL.

Padre A: Sí, pero los maestros de ESL no hablan muy bien el español.

Parent A: I get to the school and [they say] 'Good morning' ...I only understand two or three words from what they told me and then I look for my children to help me or help me ask questions

Parent B: But every general [education] school should have ESL teachers.

Parent A: Yes, but the ESL teachers don't speak Spanish very well.

Similarly, a participant from Illinois stated that communicating with school personnel was challenging. When requesting her daughter's IEP in Spanish, the school told her that it was illegal to translate IEP documents in a different language. No one at her daughter's school spoke Spanish and this participant stated that the school never offered her a translator:

Padre A: Entonces, no conozco el IEP porque el IEP, desafortunadamente, siempre viene en inglés. Entonces, nunca quieren [el personal de la escuela] traducirlo para usted porque dicen que tienen problemas legales.

Padre B: No

Padre A: No quieren meterse en problemas legales.

Padre B: Eso no es cierto. ¿Dónde te dicen eso?

Padre A: En la escuela.

Padre B: No

Padre C: Puede quejarse al departamento de servicios humanos. Ellos no pueden hacerte eso a ti. Es ilegal.

Parent A: So, I do not know the IEP because the IEP, unfortunately, always comes in English. So, they never want to translate it for you because they say they have legal problems.

Parent B: No

Parent A: They do not want to get into legal trouble.

Racism. Only Spanish-speaking participants reported racism as a barrier to communication with the school. A Spanish-speaking mother from Tennessee reported:

Nosotros [padres que hablan español] también podemos observar incluso si no hablamos inglés como ellos [personal de la escuela]. O tenemos un acento o no somos de aquí [estados unidos], es como si [personal de la escuela] te excluye.

We [Spanish-speaking parents] can also observe even if we do not speak English like them [school personnel]. Either we have an accent or we're not from here [United States], it's like they [school personnel] exclude you.

A participant from Tennessee reported that when speaking to school personnel, the school disregarded her opinion about her son with autism. She stated that the school views her as not having enough knowledge about her son's needs because of her English proficiency:

Así que, sobre todo, somos extranjeros y todavía les molesta [al personal de la escuela]. Ellos [personal de la escuela] no les gusta que les diga lo que ellos [personal de la escuela] no saben. Entonces, eso es otra cosa y ellos [el personal de la escuela] quieren ser como ellos [el personal de la escuela] siempre saben más que tú, y no me enseñaras. Entonces, es también al nivel de una actitud racial. Esta es una de las barreras.

So above all that, we are foreigners [and that] still bothers them [school personnel] more. They [school personnel] do not like you to tell them what they [school personnel] don't know. So, that's another thing and they [school personnel] want to be like they [school personnel] always know more than you, and you will not teach me. Then, it is also to the level of a racial attitude. This is one of the barriers. (Parents in agreement).

Suggestions for the Next IDEA Reauthorization

Similarities and Differences

Both English and Spanish-speaking families reported wanting IDEA to: provide improved and more special education services and offer improved teacher training. However, only English-speaking parents reported wanting IDEA to be fully funded and have accountability mechanisms for compliance. Only Spanish-speaking parents reported wanting IDEA to require greater access to translators and ways to become knowledgeable about the special education system. See Table 2.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the similarities and differences with respect to: special education experiences, parent-school communication, and desired changes to special education among English- and Spanish-speaking parents of children with disabilities. There are three notable findings in this study. First, some barriers (e.g., empowerment and lack of teacher knowledge) were exacerbated for Spanish-speaking families. While English-speaking participants also reported some level of disempowerment and lack of teacher knowledge, Spanish-speaking participants reported these issues universally and more frequently. This finding is supported by previous research about systemic barriers to advocacy among Spanish-speaking families (e.g., Author, 2016). Greater disempowerment among Spanish (versus English)

speaking families may occur due to the lack of access to special education knowledge and materials (Francis et al., 2018). Lack of teacher knowledge among Spanish (versus English) speaking families may be due to more poorly trained teachers being in minority and/or low socioeconomic schools (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Further, this finding may have policy implications as both English- and Spanish-speaking participants reported wanting teacher training and the quality of special education services to be improved in the next IDEA reauthorization.

Second, while both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking participants reported concerns about parent-school communication, some barriers were unique to Spanish-speaking families. Specifically, participants reported language, lack of translators, and racism as barriers when interacting with school personnel. Previous research about Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities documents such systemic barriers in accessing special education services (Francis et al., 2018; Angell, & Solomon, 2017). Thus, high-quality family-school communication is often unfulfilled for Spanish-speaking parents of children with disabilities (Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018). While considering these barriers, research has confirmed that frequent and positive parent-school communication produces strong family-professional partnerships for both English- and Spanish-speaking families (Haines et al., 2017). This study echoes the notion that strong parent-school communication is essential for the services children with disabilities receive (Haines et al., 2017). Thus, frequent and positive parent-school communication benefits both English- and Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities. For Spanish-speaking families, interventions need to be developed to facilitate high-quality communication between families and school professionals.

Third, both English- and Spanish-speaking parents shared negative experiences with the school. Regardless of language, parents desired improved and increased services for their children. These findings are complimentary to previous research which has also found that English- and Spanish-speaking families want improved services for their children (Angell & Solomon, 2017; Burke et al., 2018) and more frequent communication with the school (Angell & Solomon, 2017; Francis et al., 2018). Regarding the latter, research has confirmed that frequent and honest parent-school communication is a pillar of strong family-professional partnerships (Haines et al., 2017). Considered altogether, interventions, policy, and research need to address the experiences of families, including improving access to services and communication. Because these themes transcend linguistic background, it is critical that we address these experiences.

Despite several strengths of this study, there are also some limitations. First, participants were only from two states, representing a small sample of parents who have children receiving special education services. Thus, the findings may have limited transferability. There were some significant demographic differences (i.e., age and educational background) between the English- and Spanish-speaking families. Thus, the differences in special education experiences may be attributed not only to language but also to demographic differences. Second, only focus group data were collected in this study. Observational data may further illustrate similarities and differences among the families. Also, longitudinal data may provide a more holistic understanding as special education experiences change over time (Author, 2012).

Directions for Research

Research is needed to examine the effects of racism and implicit bias with respect to families of color who have children with disabilities. Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities have intersectional minority identities (e.g., race and disability, Cohen 2013).

Consistent with the findings of this study, Spanish-speaking families often experience racism by school professionals (Francis et al., 2018). Yet, little research has examined racism within the context of intersecting minority identities. Implicit bias occurs when unconsciously, negative thoughts or perceptions regarding a specific ethnic or racial group are presented based on their membership of the group (Greenwald & Kreiger, 2008). Implicit biases are more likely to be present with some families (e.g., Spanish-speaking) rather than others (English-speaking). Given this study, future research should identify the situations most likely to be affected by implicit bias, and develop and test interventions to address it.

Notably, research is also needed to examine the prevalence of types of special education experiences, especially among certain cultural groups. In part because of the focus group methodology used in this study, we could not ascertain the prevalence of a given theme. However, future research should more closely examine prevalence as barriers (for example) with greater (versus rare) frequency may be more important to be addressed by interventions. In addition, research should examine prevalence of themes (e.g., barriers, types of experiences) among certain cultural groups. In our study, we compared Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parents of children with disabilities. However, the English-speaking parents were racially diverse. Research has shown unique differences in special education experiences with respect to racial background (Haines et al., 2017). Thus, more research is needed to determine whether prevalence of themes vary in relation to racial (not just linguistic) background.

Additionally, longitudinal research is needed to examine the effects of unique and exacerbated barriers on families, parent, and student outcomes. Given the negative experiences of families in this study, especially Spanish-speaking families, it is critical to identify the causes of such experiences as well as their long-term effects. By identifying their causes, we can

develop targeted, culturally responsive interventions to prevent such negative experiences. By determining their long-term effects, we can understand the implications of such negative experiences. Notably, research about family-school partnerships suggests that when partnerships are negative, students have worse outcomes (Jeynes, 2002) and parents have greater stress (Author, 2014). Thus, it is critical to target causes of poor experiences and characterize the long-term effects of such experiences.

Implications for Practice

Based on this study and other studies (Lo & Bui, 2020; Cavendish & Connor, 2018), school professionals need to provide accurate translation services as well as ongoing communication with families. Parents desire ongoing communication from teachers (Rodriguez, Blatz, & Elbaum, 2014). When a translator is needed to communicate with families, it may be difficult to provide such consistent communication. To this end, practitioners should consider communicating with parents via daily notes. The daily note could have text written in English and Spanish so it is accessible by the teacher and the family. Regardless, the structure of the note should be discussed and agreed upon by teacher and parent.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

There were no potential conflicts of interest in this study. The study received approval from the University Institutional Review Board to conduct research with human subjects. Each participant provided informed consent before participating in the study.

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Appendix A
Focus Group Protocol

I want to thank all of you for coming. I hope that each of you enjoys our discussion. I'm going to go over some ground rules before we start. We hope that this will be a lively discussion among all of us. We ask that you respect the **confidentiality** of the information that is shared here so that everyone can feel open to exchange your opinions, your feelings, and your beliefs. Thus, each person has an ID number for the focus group. Before you speak, be sure to state your number. We also ask that the information discussed here will stay here and not be shared with others outside of the room. **If you need to get up** in the course of the conversation, feel free to do so. This is an informal discussion, so if you need to leave the room for a while, or if you have to get up and get a drink or you need to move around a little bit because you get stiff, feel free to do that. Last, there are **no right or wrong answers** here. We want to hear different points of view, so if your view on a topic differs from the views of others around the table, we need to hear that too. Group members do not have to agree, but everyone should listen respectfully as others share their views.

1. When you think about your experience as a parent in the special education process, what comes to mind?
2. Do you feel like you can affect change in the special education system?
 - a. Can you affect systemic change for other children with disabilities?
 - b. What are the barriers to affecting change? What are some ways to affect change?
3. How do you feel about legislators?
 - a. Do you feel that they listen to your concerns?
 - b. Have you ever contacted a legislator? Why?
 - c. If you have contacted a legislator, how did you contact them and what was the result of your contact?
4. How do you feel when interacting with legislators?
 - a. Do you initiate contact with legislators? For what reasons?
5. What barriers do you face in contacting legislators?
 - a. Gender
 - b. Race/ethnicity
 - c. Geographic location
 - d. Language
 - e. Cost
6. What would be some ways that parents could change the special education system?
 - a. What barriers do you face in changing the special education system?
 - b. What supports do you need to change the system?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Quiero agradecerles a todos por venir. Espero que cada uno de ustedes disfrute de nuestra discusión. Voy a repasar algunas reglas básicas antes de comenzar. Esperamos que esta sea una discusión animada entre todos nosotros. Le pedimos que respete la confidencialidad de la información que se comparte aquí para que todos puedan sentirse abiertos a intercambiar sus opiniones, sus sentimientos y sus creencias. Por lo tanto, cada persona tiene un número de identificación para el grupo de enfoque. Antes de hablar, asegúrese de indicar su número. También solicitamos que la información que se discuta aquí permanezca aquí y no se comparta con otras personas fuera de la sala. Si necesita levantarse en el transcurso de la conversación, siéntase libre de hacerlo. Esta es una discusión informal, por lo que si necesita abandonar la sala por un tiempo, o si tiene que levantarse y tomar algo, o necesita moverse un poco porque se pone erigido, siéntase libre de hacerlo. Por último, no hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas aquí. Queremos escuchar diferentes puntos de vista, por lo que si su punto de vista sobre un tema difiere de los puntos de vista de los demás en la mesa, necesitamos escuchar eso también. Los miembros del grupo no tienen que estar de acuerdo, pero todos deben escuchar respetuosamente mientras otros comparten sus puntos de vista.

1. Cuando piensas en tu experiencia como padre en el proceso de educación especial, ¿qué cambiaría?
2. ¿Siente que puede afectar el cambio de los servicios de su propio hijo(a)?
 - a. ¿Como lo has hecho (o podrías) hacer? ¿Cuáles son las barreras?
3. ¿Siente que puede afectar el cambio en el sistema de educación especial (para otros niños con discapacidades)?
 - b. ¿Cómo lo has hecho (o podrías) hacer? ¿Cuáles son las barreras para afectar el cambio sistémico?
4. ¿Cómo te sientes cuando interactúas con profesionales de la escuela (es decir, educadores, administradores escolares)?
 - c. ¿Inicia contacto con los profesionales de la escuela? ¿Por cuales razones? En caso afirmativo, ¿cómo se comunicó con ellos y cuál fue el resultado del contacto?
 - d. ¿Sientes que escuchan tus preocupaciones?
 - e. ¿Qué barreras enfrentas al contactarte con profesionales de la escuela?
5. ¿Cómo te sientes con los legisladores (personas que escriben y aprueban leyes, generalmente políticos y funcionarios electos)?
 - f. ¿Alguna vez has contactado a un legislador? ¿Por qué? En caso afirmativo, ¿cómo se comunicó con ellos y cuál fue el resultado del contacto?
 - g. ¿Sientes que escuchan tus preocupaciones? ¿Qué barreras enfrentas al contactarte con los legisladores?
6. ¿Cómo te sientes acerca de esta expectativa de abogacía para los padres en educación especial?
 - h. ¿Cómo te sientes acerca de las expectativas de abogacía para tu propio hijo?
 - i. ¿Cómo te sientes acerca de la expectativa de incidencia política para el cambio sistémico?
7. ¿Hay algo más que te gustaría agregar?

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

	English-Speaking	Spanish-Speaking	X^2/t	p
Respondent Role			3.73	.21
Mother	100% (44)	91.67% (11)		
Father	---	8.33% (1)		
Age	30.03 (11.15)	27.63 (5.69)	4.88	.03
Marital status			1.02	.50
Married	59.1% (26)	75.0% (9)		
Not married	40.9% (18)	25.0% (3)		
Education			38.07	.001
Some high school	---	66.7% (8)		
High school degree	6.8% (3)	16.7% (2)		
Some college	15.9% (7)	8.3% (1)		
College degree	38.6% (17)	---		
Graduate degree	38.6% (17)	8.3% (1)		
Household income			8.42	.13
Less than \$15,000	11.9% (5)	20.0% (2)		
\$15-29,999	11.9% (5)	30.0% (3)		
\$30-49,999	16.7% (7)	40.0% (4)		
\$50-69,999	14.3% (6)	----		
\$70-99,999	26.2% (11)	10.0% (1)		
More than \$100,000	19.0% (8)	----		
Child Gender: Male	68.2% (30)	66.7% (38)	.01	.92
Child age	13.13 (7.32)	9.83 (5.06)	1.55	.22
Type of Disability				
Intellectual disability	34.1% (15)	16.7% (2)	1.35	.31
Speech/Language Impairment	40.9% (18)	41.7% (5)	.002	.96
Autism spectrum disorder	52.3% (23)	58.3% (7)	.14	.76
Learning disability	38.6% (17)	25.0% (3)	.76	.38
Behavioral disorder	27.3% (12)	---	4.17	.05

Table 2.

Desired changes to special education among Spanish and English-Speaking families

Desired Change	English-speaking participants	Spanish-speaking participants
Improved and increased special education services	I know they only give him, like 30 minutes of occupational therapy and I think he will need more of that...And um, the speech, I think they need to give him a little more with the 30 minutes once a month	Ok, creo que actualmente los servicios que proporciona la escuela en lo que se refiere a terapias, por ejemplo, de OT o de Speech, por ejemplo, es mínimo. Ósea, es mas ni si quiera es simbólico, es por decir que tienen terapia. A mis hijos, los dos niños, ya les quitaron el OT porque ya saben escribir las letras y saben [detener] el lápiz y sabe [usar] las tijeras. Aunque, no lo haga bien Ok, I think that currently the services provided by the school in terms of therapies such as OT or Speech, for example, are minimal. Like, in other words, it is not even symbolic, it is just to say that they have therapy. My children, the two boys, have already had their OT [services] removed because they already know how to write the letters and they know [how to use] a pencil and they know how to [use] the scissors. Although, they do not do it well
Improved teacher training	The assistants are not equipped to teach. Umm, if the teacher tells them OK well he needs to focus on tracing letter A, they can do something as simple as that. But as far as knowing the strategies, and having the answers and educational know-how, those are certain background, that the assistants need and they don't have it.	Lo que puedo ver y lo que puedo observar es que los maestros no están educados suficientemente What I could see and what I could observe is that the teachers are not educated enough
IDEA accountability and funding	What I [would] love is a better first-hand knowledge of what the obligations are under the laws by the people that are implementing them. There's still so	---

much mythology spoken teacher to teacher, administrator to teacher, principal to special ed [education] teacher that people think things are there that are not so...I think there are parts and things that could change, but if people just knew it [IDEA], did it, implemented it, and enforced it, I think we'd be in pretty good shape.

Just more intervention, but sometimes we don't have the time in the day to do that, and there isn't the funding to do it. And, so it's parents who can get it outside do independent therapy get better results

Access to translators

Yo mi propósito es que mi escuela pusieran una persona bilingüe que nos pudiera dar apoyo a los papás para poder ayudar más a nuestros hijos porque creo que es muy importante la comunicación. My aim is that my school put a bilingual person who could give us support to the parents to help our children because I think communication is very important

Knowledge of special education system

Como puedo hacer para que, que es lo que necesito para inscribirlo. Me dijeron que no sabían. Me dijeron, no, no no se como lo va hacer. Y yo [pensando] como no va saber la escuela como voy a inscribir a mi hijo. Me quería, yo no se, que el mundo me comiera. What can I do to register him? They [school personnel] told me they did not know. They told me no, I do not know how to do it. And I thought, how could the school not know what to do with my son. I wanted to, I do not know, that the earth would eat me
