

Perceptions of Culturally Diverse Head Start Families

A Focus Group Study

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When other people's children become our children, and educators invest time and commitment to working with parents, we may come to the powerful realization that *all* children have the potential to learn, regardless of poverty, culture, and language. (Tam & Heng, 2005, p. 222)

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) recognizes the influence of culture on children's development and how children interact within group settings. According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), "development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts" (pg. 13). Meece and Wingate (2009/2010) suggest the social/cultural contextual component of developmentally appropriate practice supports the need for teachers to understand the influences children's social and cultural backgrounds have on learning.

As early childhood teachers gain knowledge of the cultural background of the children with whom they work, they are more prepared to create culturally relevant environments and learning experiences in which all children feel accepted and supported (Banks, 2002; Nieto, 2002; Osterman, 2000).

Teachers who embrace culturally relevant practices support children's learning by infusing "cultural referents" into the curriculum to provide children with learning opportunities that are related to their experiences outside of the classroom. They strive to establish congruency between home, community, and school and to use

knowledge of children's cultures when designing environments and experiences, thus helping children connect school to their own identities and lives (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Therefore, culturally relevant teaching practices in early childhood environments go beyond the addition of materials and props from various countries (Meece & Wingate, 2009/2010). Teachers who intentionally implement culturally relevant practices learn about the children as individuals, including their social and cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2000), to create classrooms based on equity, justice, and high expectations for all children (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Much of an early childhood teacher's knowledge of individual children comes from communication with the children and with children's families (Hyland, 2010).

Families Are Key

Families are the key transmitters of cultural beliefs and practices to their children. When early childhood professionals strive to learn about and incorporate children's cultures into their classroom settings, they can provide better continuity for the children between the two contexts (Gilliard, Moore, & Lemieux, 2007). Taking time to listen to families and to build relationships with families can help teachers gain insight into children's cultures (Banks & Banks, 1993; Durand, 2010). This is especially true when the social and cultural backgrounds of the teacher and the families differ (Espinosa, 2005).

Cheatham and Jimenez-Silva (2012) highlight the importance of early childhood educators partnering with families by listening carefully to families in an effort to understand and honor their views and by encouraging families to become partners with the teacher in a collaboration process, particularly when the teacher's culture differs from the family's culture. One study with preservice teachers found that visiting with and listening to the stories

of families whose cultures differed from the teachers' cultures gave the teachers opportunities to learn about the families, insights into their previous assumptions about diverse cultures and families, and understandings of how their attitudes shaped their instructional decisions (Kidd, Sanchez, & Thorp, 2005).

Studies by Gilliard and Moore (2007) and Kidd, Sanchez, and Thorp (2008) found the partnerships that developed between family members and teachers helped the teachers to increase their understandings of individual children and to develop curriculum connected to the children's lives and the families' beliefs, particularly when the teacher's culture and the family's culture differed. According to Swick (2003), respectful, open communication between families and teachers is essential in developing partnerships, thus enabling teachers to provide enriching learning experiences for children.

Lahman and Park (2004) state, "It is important to investigate the perspectives of both teachers and parents." For this study, we chose to listen to the voices of families with cultural backgrounds that differed from the majority European American middle class backgrounds so typical in our rural area.

The purpose of this focus group study was to investigate the cultural relevance of Head Start classrooms as perceived by culturally diverse families using the following guiding question: Are young children's backgrounds and cultures reflected in Head Start classrooms from the family perspective? Subquestions included:

1. Do culturally diverse families perceive their head Start child's classroom experiences as culturally relevant for their child?
2. How do culturally diverse families perceive their role in determining classroom activities and curriculum for their Head Start child?

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3. How do culturally diverse families perceive communication with their child's Head Start teacher?

Methodology

Head Start family service providers acted as the gatekeepers for this study. They were asked to invite culturally diverse families who had children attending Head Start preschool at six selected centers to participate in focus group interviews about their children's experiences in Head Start.

According to Creswell (2002), focus groups allow for the collection of extensive data based on the group's shared understanding of an experience. Therefore, focus groups are useful when the participants have similar experiences, are asked open-ended questions, and are prompted to respond.

In the present study, each participant had a child attending a Head Start preschool, the questions generated by the researchers were open-ended, and each participant was encouraged to respond. Additionally, the number of groups (six) was sufficient to capture extensive data for the study (Krueger, 1994).

Families from African-American and Hispanic backgrounds responded to the request to participate. At four of the centers, some parents spoke only Spanish; therefore, translators who work as family service providers for Head Start were recruited to invite parents to participate, to attend the focus groups, and to verbally translate the questions and answers during the focus group sessions. A total of 35 parents (28 mothers and seven fathers; 24 Hispanic and 11 African American) participated across the six centers.

The four investigators developed a standard interview protocol (see Table 1) to implement a systematic process of gathering data during each interview (Krueger, 1994). Since this study was designed to examine the cultural relevance of Head Start classrooms based on perceptions of these particular families, open-ended questions focused on various aspects of the families' understandings of the experiences of their children within the Head Start setting. The translators were provided with written copies of the protocol prior to beginning each session.

Two investigators attended each focus group session. One investigator asked the questions and facilitated the group discussion; the other investigator took notes, audio taped, and summarized parents'

responses at the end of the session giving participants the opportunity to clarify and add information. Investigators debriefed following each session and audio tapes were later transcribed for data analysis. All interviews were conducted within a period of four months.

Data Analysis and Findings

Data were analyzed by the investigators using a field notes based analysis with transcripts of audio tapes used for clarification purposes (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The notes and transcripts were read by each investigator. Using the questions from the protocol, categories of meaningful words and phrases were established. Words and phrases were identified as meaningful when they were used by participants in different focus group sessions at different sites to capture an idea of importance to the participants. Meaningful words and phrases for each of the protocol questions were examined to determine initial categories for each question. Upon rereading of the notes and transcripts, data were re-categorized when investigators determined new categories were needed or data needed to be rearranged.

Four major themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. Parents' desires for their children's development;
2. Parents' trust of faculty and staff;
3. Need for translator for communication with school and community; and
4. Lack of parent expectation of culturally relevant experiences for their child within the classroom.

Parents' Desires for Children's Development

The parents expressed positive feelings about the experiences their children encountered in the Head Start classrooms

and were pleased with what they felt their children were learning in the classrooms. Some of the specific learnings mentioned by many parents included songs the children sang, the learning of the alphabet, writing their names, and learning numbers.

Another aspect of the children's development that several parents mentioned was the learning of language skills. Some parents discussed that their children's communication skills had improved since they began attending Head Start. For example, one parent when speaking about her son said, "He goes to speech at Head Start and I can tell a world of difference." Another parent stated, "He had a speech delay and [the teacher], I don't know what she did with him, but he came out of his shell and he talks now."

Several parents of the children who spoke Spanish as their first language emphasized with great pride that their children were learning to speak English more fluently because English was an important skill for their children. One parent proudly discussed how her child came home from Head Start speaking English and now was teaching the parents English. Another parent talked about how her child did not speak when she first started at the Head Start but a year later she was talking more and could say the color words, sing songs, and count in English and Spanish. Another parent said he was happy that his child knew how to speak both Spanish and English.

Although parents felt that academics were important for their children to learn in Head Start, they also stressed the social skills their children were learning. According to the parents, the children were learning from the school setting to get along with and respect other people. Having their children learn these social skills was a high priority for the parents.

Many parents who had come to the United States from another country

Table 1
Focus Group Protocol

1. When your child first enrolled, how did your child's preschool teacher communicate with you about the program?
2. What are some ways that your child's preschool teacher communicates to you what your child is learning?
3. Would you give us examples of activities in which your child participates in the preschool classroom that reflect his/her interests?
4. Would you give us examples of activities in which your child participates in the preschool classroom that reflect your family's priorities?
5. What are some ways you have been involved in your child's education?
6. If you had the opportunity to talk to your child's teachers, what would you tell them you would like done differently to help your child feel accepted in the preschool class?

discussed that they desired their children to behave properly. It was a very high priority for these parents that their children do what was expected of them at school. One parent stated, "He must behave. Do what the teacher says." One father who had come to the United States from Mexico explained that he wanted his child to behave well because, in his culture, a child's actions reflect on the parents, and the parents' reputation is based on how the child behaves. If the child behaves poorly, it reflects poorly on the parents. The father explained that not only was it important for the parents to teach their children proper behavior, but it was also important for the teacher to do the same.

Parent Trust of Head Start Faculty/Staff

Overall, the parents were satisfied with their children's teachers in the Head Start setting. The parents' answers indicated that they trusted the faculty and staff to do what was best for their children. This trust tended to be built from the first communications which were often during home visits. According to the parents, during the home visits the teachers explained the various aspects of the program, gave parents details about such things as times the bus would arrive, and had paperwork for the parents to fill out. Parents reported that some teachers gave them the school phone number for contact purposes.

Some of the children rode the bus to and from their Head Start centers while others were brought to and picked up from the centers by their parents. Parents who transported their children saw the teacher on a daily basis. "Yes, I see her [the teacher] every day, and we usually have a little brief [talk] or a wave at least." One parent reported, "They've always just told me, 'Talk to me,' and when I pick her [the child] up I always just ask, 'Is there anything I can work on with [her]?'". Another parent explained that there were times when the teacher had called and asked her to come to the school to have a discussion about her child, and there were times when she had called the teacher.

Some parents talked about information provided to them by the teachers through phone calls, face-to-face conferences, or written communication. Information included their child's progress in school, suggested home activities that parents and child could do together, and upcoming events, such as conferences, that the parents were invited to attend. Additionally, the communication informed the parents

what activities the children were doing in the classroom so they could discuss the activities at home. One parent stated "You know exactly what is happening. It makes you trust them a lot more."

Although parents discussed the communication that transpired between themselves and the teachers, some also talked of relying on their children to tell them what was happening in the classroom. One parent listed many of the activities that her child participated in during the school day. She had not been in the classroom and had not discussed these activities with the teacher, but she knew about them because of some of the items that her daughter brought home (e.g., writing, paintings, crafts). She said that when her child arrived home after being at school she talked about everything she did that day.

Dependence on Translator for Communication with School and Community

During the school year, many parents received weekly or monthly newsletters that were sent home with their children by the center staff. The newsletters explained classroom activities, provided details about upcoming events, and offered information about various resources available to parents. Although communication was a key to building the relationships between the parents and the Head Start faculty and staff, for the parents whose primary language was Spanish, communication could be problematic. One parent who spoke Spanish explained that if the family service provider was not available there was no one to translate for her.

For the parents who spoke Spanish as their primary language, the translations provided by the family service providers were critical for communication with their children's teachers and community agencies. The family service providers translated between the teachers and parents during home visits and meetings throughout the year. Some of the family service providers translated written communication that was sent home during the school year; however, this was not the case for all of the parents.

When written communication was not translated prior to being sent home, the parents frequently sought out the family service provider to translate and explain the communication. Some parents even relied on the family service provider to explain written communication that was not school related. For example, one parent said she brought her telephone bill to the

family service provider to translate and explain to her.

Lack of Expectations of Culturally Relevant Experiences for Children

Parents accepted the curriculum the teachers implemented without questioning cultural relevance of activities. When asked how their child was represented in the various classroom activities, one mother mentioned how her child was beginning to see differences between her own family culture and the mainstream culture she experienced in her Head Start classroom. When the mother read aloud, the child would ask if she was reading the way her teacher spoke or the way the mother spoke. This mother felt it was important for her child to know her family background so she would know who she was. Other than this mother, there were no specific comments from the families about the children learning about their culture or how their culture was represented in the classrooms.

The parents' responses to questions about activities that their child participated in during Head Start indicated they had few expectations that their child would have experiences that represented their family culture. They were pleased their child was fitting into the classroom and learning to get along with other children. Although one parent who spoke Spanish pointed out that his child was now able to speak both Spanish and English, overall the parents discussed their satisfaction that their child was learning to speak, read, and write in English.

When asked what suggestions they would make to their child's teacher to help their child feel accepted in the classroom, they made no suggestions and expressed their overall satisfaction with the teachers and what was occurring in the classrooms. The parents explained that their children were treated well, were making progressing, and were enjoying going to school. Some parents also mentioned that they would thank the teachers for what they did for their child. At one site where all the parents spoke Spanish, they did agree that they would like the written communication to consistently be translated into Spanish before being sent home.

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of culturally diverse families about their children's culturally relevant experiences in six Head Start centers. The data suggest that these parents

trusted the teachers and staff to do what was best for their children. One aspect of building trust between families and teachers is communication (Okagaki & Diamond, 2000); however, when families do not speak English and teachers do not speak the family's language, communication may be difficult (Lahman & Park, 2004).

Although the parents in the present study discussed the communication they had with the teachers, there were barriers for those who spoke little or no English, yet they did not discuss feeling disrespected or intimidated as other studies have found (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Pena, 2000; Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008). They relied on the family service providers to help in translating spoken and written communication and at times had to wait for the family service provider to be available. Family service providers can be a bridge between the school environment and families by helping school staff and family members understand how to work together for the benefit of the child (Seyfried & Chung, 2002).

According to Lundgren and Morrison (2003), parents who do not speak English may not receive important information as a result of the language difference; therefore, early childhood professionals must be prepared to address this need. The communication barrier for participants in the present study was partially addressed by the centers hiring translators to assist the families with various communication needs. Additionally, one center had some teachers and staff who did speak Spanish.

If the children of the participants were exposed to culturally relevant experiences within the classrooms, the parents did not share these experiences during the interviews, even though questions were specifically asked to illicit this information. Therefore, whether the Head Start teachers offer experiences to the children that the families would consider culturally relevant remains unknown. Several parents mentioned that they did not visit in their child's classroom. Their children may be exposed to experiences that reflect their culture without the parents being aware of these experiences.

If this is the case, this is an example of a breakdown of communication. On the other hand, culturally relevant experiences may not be provided for the children in the classrooms. Further research is needed to study how teachers view the role of culturally relevant experiences in Head Start classrooms, the prevalence of culturally relevant experiences within Head

Start classrooms, and the methods Head Start teachers use to learn about families' beliefs, values, and cultures to be able to enhance children's learning.

A second aspect of the trust parents felt may relate to the beliefs some cultures tend to hold about teachers. For example, in the Latino culture, authority figures such as teachers are held in high regard and often are seen as the expert (Castro, Ayankoya, & Kasprzak, 2011). Parents' beliefs that the teachers are doing what is best for their children may help to establish the sense of trust felt by the parents.

Seyfried and Chung (2002) suggested that parents from various cultural backgrounds may believe that teachers are experts in their field; therefore, the teachers do what is in the best interest of the child. Additionally, Lundgren and Morrison (2003) report that families from Latino backgrounds often believe teachers are the authority and do not seek help or question teachers' actions.

If the participants in this study viewed their child's teachers as experts, they may never question the experiences their child has in the classroom. Furthermore, the persona a teacher takes on when meeting with parents may influence how parents respond to the teacher. If the teacher presents herself as the knowledgeable professional, parents may feel confident that she is doing the right things for the child without questioning the processes. In this circumstance, partnership is not achieved.

Open, two-way communication between parent and teacher must occur for true partnerships to develop (Mardell & Abo-Zena, 2010). Creating partnerships between teachers and families can lead to more appropriate educational experiences for children (Kieff & Wellhausen, 2000; Kirmani, 2007); therefore, there is a need for teachers' skills in partnering with families to continually develop.

A final implication of this study is a caution about drawing conclusions based on ethnicity without considering other factors. Head Start enrollment is based on socioeconomic status; therefore, these participants were all from a lower socioeconomic level. Had participants with similar ethnic backgrounds but a higher socioeconomic level been interviewed using the same protocol, the findings may have differed based on socioeconomic status. Further studies with participants from diverse socioeconomic levels and ethnicities are indicated.

Additional Research Needed

Additional research based on Head Start teachers' views of how they design and implement culturally relevant experiences for the children they serve is needed. Teachers report they want more information about how best to meet the needs of children and families from diverse populations (Daniel & Friedman, 2005). Results of both parents and teachers perspectives may influence teacher education programs as they develop their curriculum to address issues of diversity with their students.

For example, as Carreon, Drake, and Barton (2005) suggest, teacher education programs can help teachers understand how they can draw on the cultural capital of families when designing instruction to better reflect the backgrounds of children in their classrooms.

Limitation

A limitation of this study was the inability of any of the researchers to speak Spanish. Although translators were used to translate between researchers and participants as needed, at times, the translators summarized what a participant said rather than providing word for word translation. This may have hindered the depth of the communication the researchers were able to achieve and prevented researchers from gaining a full understanding of the perspectives of all participants.

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