

Full Length Research

Teachers' Perceptions of Latino Parental Involvement Within an Urban Low-Income School Context in The United States.

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The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of Latino parents' school involvement, as well as to investigate whether these perceptions are related to teachers' characteristics (i.e., age (generational cohort), race/ethnicity, teaching experience, bilingual ability). Data for this study were collected from 141 teachers working in low-income, urban charter schools in a large city in Southern California. Using descriptive and inferential statistics, the author analyzed teachers' overall characteristics (i.e. race and ethnicity, age, gender, bilingual ability, teaching experience) and whether these characteristics predicted their perceptions of Latino parents' school-related involvement. Results suggest that teachers working at these urban low-income charter schools are diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, and language (i.e., English and Spanish), and that a majority have graduate degrees. More importantly, teachers' rated, on average, home-based (non-observable) parental involvement activities and strategies significantly lower than school-based (observable) activities and strategies. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions of Latino parents' school involvement varied by generational cohort (i.e., age): younger (i.e., millennial teachers) perceived Latino parents as being significantly less involved in their child's schooling as compared with older teachers. No other characteristic (i.e. race and ethnicity, age, gender, bilingual ability, teaching experience) predicted differences in teacher perceptions of parental involvement. Implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: Latino parents, Parental Involvement, Charter Schools, Millennial teachers, urban schools

INTRODUCTION

The student population in the public school system in the United States of America is becoming increasingly racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse. Because of these demographic changes, it is becoming increasingly important that teachers are open to differences across multiple social categories- gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status. For this study, I was interested in examining teachers' openness in terms of cultural understanding, expectations, and norms between teachers, students, and parents within an American low-income urban context. This openness becomes particularly important for new and pre-service teachers, when the number of Latino students nationwide has increased from 19% to 25% between 2003 and 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics,

2014). Given these figures, it is increasingly essential to have a teaching force that is culturally competent to teach a diverse student body and work with parents from diverse backgrounds in the United States. This is important given that racial and ethnic minority children, especially those from poor and immigrant-origins families, are disproportionately placed in low-ability groups early in their education (Blanchett et al., 2005). Hence, teachers must have the cultural competence to work with minority and immigrant-origin families within the challenges faced in urban high-poverty communities in the U.S. There is a dearth of research on how teachers are successfully working with such families and in these communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Millennial Teachers

At the same time as the U.S. public school population becomes increasingly diverse, the United States faces a critical shortage of teachers nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This is caused, in part, by the largest teacher retirement wave in history (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future 2011). Over half of American teachers and principals will retire during the current decade, 2009-2019 (NCTAF, 2011). This is a generational cohort popularly referred to as the *Baby Boomers*; it encompasses those born between 1946-1964 (Pollard and Scommegna, 2014). As the *Baby Boomers* retire from the teaching work force, a new large cohort of new teachers is entering it. The vast majority of current pre-service teachers, and therefore new teachers, belong to the millennial generation. This generational cohort encompasses those born in or after 1980. Millennials have outnumbered baby boomers and are now the largest living generation with approximately 74.5 million (Fry, 2016). More importantly, the millennial generation is expected to continue to increase in the coming decades (Fry, 2016). Therefore, the millennial generation will become a critical part of the solution of the U.S. teacher shortage and the future of American classrooms.

The American millennial generation has lived through unprecedented times- experiencing rapid globalization and technological advancement, and increasing demographic diversity (Ng, E.S.W., Schweitzer and Lyons., 2010). Extant research suggests that given these global and diverse interconnectivity characteristics, Millennials are more likely to be more open to diversity (Rodriguez and Hallman, 2013). This may be very important for teachers entering the work force, as the United States experiences rapid demographic changes (Migration Policy Institute, 2011). Thus, one goal of the current study was to examine this generational stereotype of "openness to diversity" by examining millennial (34 years or younger) teachers' perceptions of Latino parent involvement within an urban low-income context. This setting is important because teacher shortage is grave and exacerbated in urban low-income communities (Kincheloe, 2004).

Latino Immigrant Parents and Challenges to Parental Involvement

Immigrant parents may face unique challenges in understanding and navigating the American school system. Latino immigrant-origin parents, whose primary language is not English, appear to be particularly affected by such factors as difficulty making meeting times during school hours, a perception that schools do not make parents feel welcome, and meetings being

conducted only in English (Turney and Kao, 2009). Some Latino parents work in low-wage, inflexible jobs that may not allow them to attend school meetings and events (Ramirez, 2003). Furthermore, some Latino parents have expressed that schools do not listen to them or care to listen, parents may be intimidated by a complex educational system that may work in different fashion from the systems in their countries of origin (Ramirez, 2003). While not all immigrant children are low-income and not all are disadvantaged, research suggests that Latino immigrant-origin students tend to be more likely to live in poverty and be at higher risk of academic difficulties than White students (U.S. Census, 2009; Carhill, Suárez-Orozco, and Páez, 2008). There is a dearth of research on how teachers are promoting or inhibiting parental involvement for Latino immigrant-origin parents. Hence, it is important that we understand the opportunities and challenges that teachers may encounter when working with Latino parents. This is a primary aim of the proposed study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Who are the teachers working at charter schools targeting primarily low-income students of Latino immigrant-origin backgrounds?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of Latino parental involvement in their child's schooling? What factors such as language, age or cultural congruence, gender or experience inform these perceptions?
3. Are there differences in teachers' assessments of Latino parental involvement by generational cohort? That is, do younger teachers, because of their perceived openness to diversity, rate parental involvement higher than general education teachers?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were 141 teachers working at 14 low-income (as defined by the percentage of students eligible for the federal government's free or reduced school breakfast and lunch program (Diemer, Mistry, Wadsworth, and Lopez, 2013) urban charter schools in a large city in Southern California. Descriptive statistics showed a diverse teaching force: 59% of the teachers were female, Latino 41%, White 35%, Asian- American 16%, and 8% were African-American, Other 1%. Nearly half of all teachers reported being bilingual in Spanish (44%); an additional 13% were bilingual in another language. Half of all teachers (52%) have a Masters's degree.

Procedure

Sample of teachers were drawn from the largest nonprofit charter management organization (CMO) in a large city in Southern California. These charter schools only provide high schools and middle schools due to the organization's focus on college-readiness. A total of 26 charter schools serve a student population that is over 90% low income, based on data on students' eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. Over 80% of the student population is Latino and approximately 30% are classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) (California Department of Education, 2015). Fourteen of the 26 principals agreed to send the online survey to their schools' teachers. The survey was sent via email, using the online platform SurveyMonkey, to approximately 250 teachers. A reminder email was sent a week after the initial email. Teachers who filled out the survey were entered into an iPad mini raffle.

Measures

Teacher characteristics. Teachers answered questions regarding their demographic information. Specifically, teachers answered questions about age, race/ethnicity, teaching experience, education level, teaching specialization – general education or special education- and bilingual ability (e.g., What is your age? How long have you been teaching?). There were 10 items in this section of the survey.

Teacher cultural congruence. Teachers answered questions regarding their cultural background as compared to the families they serve. Specifically, teachers assessed their cultural congruence by rating 4 statements (e.g., I share the same cultural background as the families I work with; see Appendix A) on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Disagree Strongly) to 6 (Agree Strongly). All items are scaled such that higher values indicate a higher level of congruence between teachers and parents. This scale was developed for this study. Teacher cultural congruence was included in the model as a predictor variable.

Perceptions of Parental Involvement. In order to gauge teachers' perceptions of parents' school involvement, teachers responded to questions regarding parents' behaviors and beliefs. Teachers rated 9 statements (e.g., "Parents of children with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), participate in the IEP process (i.e., attend IEP meetings, check progress with teachers)." see Appendix A), on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always), with higher scores signifying higher levels of parental involvement. This measure was divided into two sections; home-based vs. school based. 6 of the 9 items assessed school-based parental involvement activities and strategies (e.g. Parents attend school meetings and events). The remaining 3 items assessed home-based parental involvement activities and strategies (e.g. Parents take

their child to the library, community events, or similar places). This measure was adapted from the Parent Involvement Project (PIP) parent and teacher questionnaires (Whetse, and Hoover-Dempsey, 2002). PIP has been used to measure parental involvement in other studies, and was adapted to include special education parent involvement in this study.

Perceptions of parental involvement were included in the model as an outcome variable (DV). Reliability, as assessed via Cronbach's Alpha, was high (0.84). Moreover, an exploratory factor analysis, using Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) with a Promax rotation, revealed two factors with eigenvalues above one. Factor 1 represented a school-based parental involvement factor, comprised of and accounted for approximately 44% of the shared variance. Factor 2 consisted of three items that captured parents' home-based activities, and accounted for approximately 12% of the shared variance. The inter-scale correlation was .66 indicating some shared variance among the two factors.

RESULTS

RQ1: Who are the teachers working at charter schools targeting primarily low-income students of Latino immigrant-origin backgrounds?

A total of 141 participants filled out the online survey (56% response rate).

Descriptive statistics showed a diverse teaching force: 59% of the teachers were female, Latino 41%, White 35%, Asian-American 16%, and 8% were African-American, Other 1%. Nearly half of all teachers reported being bilingual in Spanish (44%); an additional 13% were bilingual in another language. Half of all teachers (52%) had a Masters degree. The vast majority of respondents were millennial teachers (i.e., younger than age 34; 77%). The average teaching experience was 2.5 years (SD= 1.1) (see Table 1).

RQ2: What are teachers' perceptions of Latino parents' involvement in their child's schooling? What factors such as language, age or cultural congruence inform these perceptions?

Descriptive statistics show that overall teachers rated Latino parents involvement as moderate (M= 3.25, SD= 0.49) (see Table 2). A t-test was conducted to compare ratings of *home-based* perceptions of parental involvement vs. *school-based* perceptions of parental involvement. There was a significant difference in the ratings of home-based (non-observable) parental involvement (M= 2.74, SD= 0.53) and school-based (observable) parental involvement (M= 3.51, SD= 0.55); $t(140) = 17, p < .000$. Home-based parental involvement was rated, on average, as significantly lower than school-based parental involvement.

Results of linear regression analyses indicated that teachers' perceptions of Latino parents' school involvement varied by age: millennial teachers perceived

Table 1: Respondents' Descriptive

Demographics	N	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	84	59.2
Male	58	40.8
Race/Ethnicity		
African- American	11	7.7
Asian-American	22	15.5
Latino	56	39.4
White	47	33.1
Other	6	4.2
Language		
Spanish/English	62	43.7
Other/English	18	12.7
English Only	62	43.7
Age		
Millennial (18-34 years old)	108	76.6
Gen 35-44 years old)	23	16.3
Older Gen (45-74 years old)	10	7.1
Experience		
First year teacher	27	19
2-3 Years	49	34.5
4-5 years	23	16.2
5+ years	43	30.3
Education		
B.A.	17	12.1
Graduate(Credential)	47	33.3
Graduate (M.A.Education)	65	45.8
Graduate (Other)	9	6.4
Doctorate	3	2.1

Table 2: Parental Involvement Survey Items

Teachers' Perceptions of Parental Involvement	M)(SD)
School Based	
Parents attend school meetings and events.	3.58(0.64)
There is parent-teacher communication	3.78(0.73)
Parents communicate with school staff.	3.47(0.072)
Parents volunteer at the school (i.e. Help during lunch time, attend field trips.	3.38(0.092)
Parents of children with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), participate in the (IEP) process.	3.88(0.78)
Parents contact me if they have concerns about their child.	2.98(0.88)
Home Based	
Parents talk to their child about what he or she is learning.	2.88(0.66)
Parents take their child to the library, community events, or similar places.	2.62(0.64)
Parents ensure their children complete homework.)	2.73(0.68)

n=141

Min and Max = (Never=1,Rarely=2,Sometimes=3,Often=4, Always=5)

Latino parents as being significantly less involved in their child's schooling as compared with older teachers. No other characteristic (i.e., teacher's educational specialization – general or special education – language, ethnicity, background or culture) predicted differences in teacher perceptions of parental involvement. Finally, there was no difference in teachers' ratings of parental involvement by teachers' area of specialization (i.e., special education vs. general education teacher).

RQ. 3: Are there differences in teachers'

assessments of Latino parental involvement by generational cohort? That is, do younger teachers, because of their perceived openness to diversity, rate parental involvement higher than general education teachers?

Teachers' perceptions of Latino parents' school involvement varied by age: younger (i.e., millennial teachers) perceived Latino parents as being significantly less involved in their child's schooling as compared with older teachers (Table 3). No other characteristic (i.e.,

Table 3: Regression Analyze

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error (B)	standardized Coefficients (B)
Constant	3.284	0.214	
Gender	-0.034	0.083	-0.034
Experience	-0.023	0.044	0.051
Culture	0.187	0.1	0.191
Millenial (Age)	-0.034*	0.162	0.276
Language	-0.139	0.1	-0.142

*P=0.05

teacher's educational specialization – general or special education – language, ethnicity, background or culture) predicted differences in teacher perceptions of parental involvement at a statistical significant level.

DISCUSSION

In a time when the population in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, it is important to consider teachers' perceptions of Latino parental involvement- the largest minority group in the nation. Three main study findings and implications for practice are discussed. First, the diversity of the teachers in the sample juxtaposes the national statistics on teachers that reports that 85% of all kindergarten through 12 grade teachers are white and female. Second, teachers rated home-based Latino parental involvement significantly lower than they did school-based parental involvement. Third, younger teachers (i.e. millennial teachers) rated parents as less involved than older teachers' ratings.

First, nationwide, 85% of K-12 public school teachers are White and middle class (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). This national statistic is in stark contrast to the current study sample where 39% of teachers identified as Latino, 33% as White, 15% Asian-American, and 8% African-American. This suggests that the teachers in the current study are a highly diverse teaching force, which might be more likely to be more open to diversity. More importantly, the sample is not be representative of the teaching force nationwide. This may be due to the fact that the population of the Southern California city in which the current study was conducted is more diverse than the rest of the country. According to US Census (2010) data, the city's population was 28% White, 9% Black, 12% Asian, 49% Latino, and 2% Other. Interestingly, the teacher sample in the study closely matched the race-ethnicity of the city's population. Therefore, their perceptions of parental involvement may suggest a unique ecological perspective.

Second, teachers in the sample rated, on average, home-based parental involvement significantly lower than school-based involvement. This is important because home-based parental involvement has been

found to have greater effects on student academic performance than school-based involvement (Mena, 2011; Fan, 2001; Singh et al., 1995). However, the research literature suggests that Latino parents are more likely to engage in activities aligned with home-based involvement (e.g. structuring and monitoring their child's homework) and Latino students report high home-based parental involvement in the form of high expectations (Mena, 2011). This is important given that Latino parents have reported not feeling welcome in schools (Ramirez, 2003), which may undermine their school-based involvement. However, teachers perceptions in the sample suggest that the opposite is happening in these mostly Latino low-income schools. Why are teachers in the sample reporting lower home-based parental involvement? One possibility could be that since these behaviors are non-observable by teachers, they may assume these behaviors are not happening. This is problematic because teachers might have misconceptions about a lack of Latino parental involvement, when the opposite might be true. Nonetheless, more research is required to corroborate that this may be the case.

Third, millennial teachers in the sample (age 18-34) rated Latino parental involvement significantly *lower* than older teachers (age 34+) in the sample. This may be due to a multitude of factors, but two potential causes are discussed here. First, one could imply that age is a proxy for experience. Hence, older, more experienced teachers would be more likely to be more nuanced to distinguishing parental involvement. However, results from linear regression suggest that teaching experience was not a factor in varying perceptions of Latino parental involvement but rather that there is something specific about the age group 18-34 (millennial) that resulted in significantly lower perceptions of Latino parental involvement with disregard to teacher's experience. Research suggests that Millennials value honesty and open communication (Ng, Schweitzer and Lyons, 2010). In this case, it could be that millennial teachers were simply more honest in rating Latino parental involvement, while older teachers rated them more favorably due to the "social image" that rating Latino parent involvement lower would reflect on them. Thus, it could be that millennial teacher perceptions of Latino parental involvement are more accurate. However, this

conclusion cannot be inferred from the data, and more research would be needed to explore this possibility.

Implications for Practice

One implication for practice informed by the findings of this study is that pre-service teachers need to be better prepared to engage Latino immigrant-origin parents from low socio-economic status backgrounds in the educational process. That is, pre-service programs need to address the lower levels of Latino parental involvement at home reported by the teachers in the current study, especially the millennial teachers, by including multicultural education in their pre-service teacher programs, and including tools with which teachers can engage this population better (Torres and Hurtado-Vivas, 2011). For instance, it could be that new teachers need strategies on how to establish and maintain positive relationships with diverse parents from low socio-economic status backgrounds in general. Teachers need to know how to foster home-based and school-based parental involvement in the face of serious parental economic and social constraints. New teachers face the challenge of engaging this population of parents within the context of many problems commonly encountered in low-income urban communities, such as high-unemployment, gangs, violence and under-resourced schools. Also, teachers need to be aware of psychological factors that affect low-income families due to financial stress (Gilbert, Brown and Mistry, 2014). Consequently, pre-service teachers (i.e. the millennial generation in teacher training programs) may need to learn evidence-based interventions for involving more these parents in the educational process.

Future Directions and Limitations

In a time when the population in the United States is becoming increasingly diverse, it is important to consider teachers' perceptions of Latino parental involvement- the largest minority group in the nation. The findings suggest that more research is needed to explore what are the tools that teachers are lacking to engage Latino parents better. An important limitation in the study is that the teacher sample is very diverse in comparison to race/ethnicity teacher statistics in the U.S. Hence, the sample may not represent the vast majority of teachers in the U.S. On the other hand, this particularly diverse sample of teachers could also be seen as strength in the present study. This is because one can assume that most of the research about teachers is conducted with White teachers, who represent the immense majority of the teaching force in the U.S.

Finally, the methods and measures used could

be improved for a follow-up study. Researchers could include survey items that are specific to Latino parents (e.g., common home-based involvement practices for Latino parents). In similar fashion, a qualitative component would shed light into why teachers are having these perceptions of Latino parental involvement. By learning the reasons behind these perceptions practitioners could help create the necessary tools to improve collaboration between teachers and Latino parents.

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