

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Maternal Perceptions of Acculturation at the Onset of Child Schooling: Implications for Teachers

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This qualitative study examined mothers' perspectives on their preschoolers' acculturation and the relationship to their own acculturation. Three acculturation processes emerged from the qualitative data that illustrate how mothers perceive their own and their child's acculturation: parallel, vertex, and inter-segmented. Each type may have implications for teacher-parent interactions. This summary highlights how the results from the published article can be implemented in the classroom and how teachers can engage immigrant parents whose acculturation process may vary. Specifically, we emphasize the need to understand parents' approaches and expectations as they relate to cultural adaptations, especially at the onset of schooling.

Keywords: acculturation, parent, child, teacher, school

Latinos, who comprise 20% of children in the United States (U.S. Census, 2012), are struggling academically (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Family income and parents' level of education affect children's access to preschool and school readiness (Entwisle & Alexander, 1995; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). Children from Latino families who are struggling economically, begin school at a disadvantage (Rumberger & Arellano, 2009; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Head Start is poised to have an early, positive impact on this large and growing population. For children of immigrant parents, the onset of schooling may also initiate the acculturation process for parent and child. While there is a growing body of research that describes an adolescent's acculturation experiences, less is known about the preschooler's acculturation and her parents' own acculturation during the early education experiences, such as those that occur in preschool.

This article describes results from a qualitative study with six Latina immigrant mothers whose preschooler attended a community-based preschool program offered by Healthy Start

Support Services for Children Act (Healthy Start Initiative). The objective of the study described here was to learn about mothers' perceptions regarding their preschooler's acculturation experiences within the school setting while exploring the mother's acculturation process. The mothers in the study were part of a cohort of volunteers who participated in classroom activities while their child attended the preschool program. After several weeks of interactions with the volunteers that were designed to build trust, the volunteers were invited to participate in the study. Establishing trust with prospective Latino immigrant participants is paramount to any study, particularly when the study focuses on parenting, child development and school aspirations (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004; Bender, Harbour, Thorp, & Morris, 2001). Informal conversations often took place during the first author's (Lara-Cinisomo) participant observations and interactions with volunteer mothers. Once mothers consented to participate, they were interviewed about their children's emotional needs to mother's perception of their preschooler's school performance. Results based on qualitative data analyses revealed interesting acculturation processes as perceived by the six mothers interviewed for the study.

The first process observed in the data is referred to as parallel acculturation, which, from the mother's perceptions, illustrates a distinct acculturation process between mother and child. Here, the mother perceives her child's acculturation as occurring separately from her own process. Based on our analysis of the data, the parallel mother appears to resist acculturating and discourages her child from doing so as well. While this mother has academic goals for her child, integration into American culture and practices are discouraged within the home. For instance, while the mother in our study understands the value of learning English, she prohibits her son from speaking it in the home despite her preschooler's pride in knowing and speaking the language. It is likely that teachers have observed such behaviors in a fraction of the Latino immigrant families they work with. In those instances, it will be important that teachers not interpret a parent's resistance to acculturate as potentially having a negative consequence on the child's academic preparation or performance. Instead, teachers are encouraged to respect parents' need to maintain their cultural values and beliefs by supporting parents' academic aspirations for their children. For instance, while the parallel mother in our study was resistant to her child's use of English in the home, she did not dispute the importance of her child's education and the need to learn English to be successful in school. Therefore, teachers might want to highlight the child's success in school and encourage parents to engage in their child's academic experiences while using Spanish in the home. Given that there might be conflict between the child's desire to use English when possible and his mother's restrictions in the home, it will be important to provide parents with written material in Spanish that explains the objective of a homework assignment and ways that parents can help regardless of language spoken at home. Furthermore, Ceballos (2004) cautions against using White, middle-class norms to understand immigrant Latino families. She found that while immigrant Latino parents may not be involved in their children's school, they support education by voicing their commitment to the U.S. educational system, protecting their children's study space and time, and respecting their children's autonomy in the academic sphere. Thus, the support of Latino parents may be less apparent to teachers, but no less important to the student.

We also found that mothers in our study described an acculturation pattern they observe in themselves and their preschooler as what we define as a vertex process. Here, both mother and child start at the same place, possibly with the same level of English proficiency, then gradually take different paths. This shift in trajectory between mother and child might be attributed to the amount of contact the parent and child have with American cultural practices and values. The

mean number of years in the U.S. among the three mothers identified as vertex was just over six years. Furthermore, the degree to which these mothers felt they had acculturated might be influenced by their confidence in, say, speaking English. For instance, while the three vertex mothers in this article reported interfacing with U.S. schools in the past, two also said they did not consider themselves to be proficient in English. Like the parallel mother described above, the vertex mothers in this study support their child's English language acquisition as a necessary step toward academic success. The distinction between the parallel and vertex mother is the degree to which she promotes those American practices. In the case of the vertex mother, she makes a conscious effort to encourage her child's English skills by engaging in English lessons led by the child and by using simple phrases to promote her own English language skills. For instance, one mother reported that she practiced her English with her son by asking him "Give me a kiss." This seemingly simple request helps the mother build confidence and competence in English while demonstrating to her child that practice in the home is acceptable and welcome.

Also characteristic of the vertex parent is the promotion of bilingualism. More specifically, mothers in our study said they promoted the use of Spanish and English and believed that both language should be promoted and used in the home. Bilingualism is associated with positive family relations (Portes & Hao, 2002) and is academically advantageous (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Lindholm & Aclan, 1991). Therefore, teachers who work with parents who demonstrate an interest in using and learning English can capitalize on this enthusiasm to promote strong parent-school ties so that both the parent and child feel welcome in the school. Here, teachers might also help explain the objective of each school assignment in English and in the native language to scaffold the parent's interest in supporting their child and to enhance the parent's own learning. Parental involvement in schools has been shown to have a positive impact on parents' social capital (Durand, 2011) as well as child academic and behavioral outcomes (Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Lahaie, 2008). Therefore, supporting parental involvement is a multi-generation investment teachers and school staff can make.

A third acculturation process identified in the data is referred to as inter-segmented, which highlights how parent and child might have their own yet collective acculturation process. In this case, mother and child have points where their acculturation process intersects and later diverges. For instance, both might learn English at the onset of the child's schooling and over time, the child's trajectory might diverge or speed up, making him more acculturated than his mother, but as his mother acquires more English language skills they will intersect. The following quote provided in the article illustrates this process. When asked if it might be possible that her children might learn more English than her, one inter-segmented mother's affirmative response was followed with "*Por eso me voy a preparar...Yo quiero prepararme para cuando ellos lleguen ya a un 'college' para poderles ayudar.*" (That's why I'm going to get prepared...I want to prepare myself for when they attend college, so I can help them.) In our article, we define this independent and shared process as inter-segmented to capture the ebb and flow of mother and child's acculturation progression.

Results from our qualitative analysis also revealed that the inter-segmented dyad engages in explicit discussions about culture, ethnic identity, and the value of bilingualism. Both mothers identified as inter-segmented shared specific discussions they have with their preschool child about the importance of maintaining one's cultural values while acculturating. Like the vertex mother, bilingualism is valued. However, there seems to be a more explicit discussion regarding the role Spanish plays in the home and the child's identity development. These conversations between mother and child might be facilitated by the mother's confidence in her own identity.

Immigrant parents who have a strong ethnic identity engage in racial socialization with their children, explicitly discussing ethnic pride, history, and heritage (Hughes, 2003). These intergenerational interactions result in high self-esteem for the child (Guilamo-Ramos, 2009), the child's exploration and resolution of ethnic identity (Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, & Sands, 2006; Juang and Syed 2010), and the child's development of ethnic values (Knight, Berkel, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales, Ettekal, Jaconis, & Boyd, 2011). Inter-segmented mothers' confidence may be a result from years spent in the U.S. The two mothers identified as inter-segmented had spent an average of eleven years in the U.S. at the time of the interview. It is likely that these mothers have had time to navigate through U.S. systems (e.g., schools) and were successful in those experiences. It is unclear whether parents who have spent an equal amount of time in the U.S. but felt marginalized will also exhibit the same confidence and motivation to discuss ethnic pride with her preschooler. Inclusion of parents with more than ten years in the U.S. who have had positive and negative experiences in the U.S. will be important in teasing out factors that promote conversations about ethnic pride with their preschooler.

The results from this study highlight that while mother and child may start at the same point of the acculturation process, they can take distinct paths and periodically intersect. Given the benefit of a more constant acculturation progression between parent and child (Portes & Zady, 2002), there is value to supporting a parent's process whether it be parallel to her child's acculturation, a complete departure, or a periodic overlap. It is also important to note that results reported in this article provide only a snapshot of a parent-child acculturation process that is filtered through the mother's lens. Still, while we are limited by this window into the dynamic process of acculturation in the absence of longitudinal studies that follow parent and child at the onset of schooling, we can draw from the adult and child developmental literature and the three processes highlighted in this article to better understand acculturation observed inside and outside the classroom. Specifically, we learn that time spent in the U.S. may be associated with acculturation patterns observed between mother and child. The results reported here also illustrate the value the six Latina immigrant mothers in the study place on retaining Spanish language skills as well as the value these mothers place on maintaining their own cultural values and practices. Therefore, teachers can support immigrant parents in their efforts to maintain their native language, promote ethnic behaviors, and instill cultural beliefs in their children by accepting that immigrant parents have different paths to acculturation while supporting their child's school success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the families who generously gave of their time. In addition, the authors would like to give a special thanks to Angie Preciado who assisted with the recruitment and data collection. Finally, this manuscript is dedicated to Maureen Haun, child advocate, a supporter of immigrant families, and a leader in the field of child and family development. Her contribution to children and families will always be remembered. This study would not have been possible without her support and guidance.

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