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## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### The Importance of Home-School Communication as a Tool for Engaging Latino Parents

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This article discusses a study that examined multiple types of parent involvement with a sample of Latino immigrant parents whose children were enrolled in Head Start. Findings suggest that cultural factors, parental efficacy, and parents' ability to communicate with the school impacted parent involvement. The results suggest that Head Start programs can promote parent involvement among Latino immigrant populations by incorporating cultural values and offering services, such as ESL classes, to increase interest and facilitate communication. The importance of helping parents overcome language barriers and providing specific information about the types of involvement at home and school to parents is also discussed.

The primary objective of Head Start has been to enhance the social and cognitive competence of preschool children, while also promoting parent involvement. Today, Latinos are one of the largest groups served by Head Start programs (36%) and over one quarter of all children attending Head Start live in households where English is not the primary language spoken (Aikens, Tarullo, Hulseley, Ross, West, & Xue, 2010). To maximize the impact of Head Start for these children, it is essential that we understand the needs, values, and beliefs of Latino parents and their children.

Prior research has established the benefit of parent involvement on children's academic performance as early as preschool. Parent involvement can occur in both home and school contexts. Some research demonstrates that structural barriers associated with poverty and parent satisfaction with Head Start interfere with Latino parents' involvement (McWayne, Campos, & Owsianik, 2008; Mendez & Westerberg, 2012). Parental self-efficacy, acculturative status, and parents' ability to communicate with the school might also impact parents' involvement in education.

To better understand these relations, we conducted a study of parent involvement in three domains: home, school, and the home-school relationship. First, we examined potential differences among scales measuring home involvement, school involvement, and home-school conferencing to understand the relative levels of involvement and differences associated with context. Next, we examined differences in parent involvement with respect to acculturation. We

tentatively hypothesized that parents who endorse high levels of Latino cultural identity may be more involved in the home but not necessarily the school due to the cultural belief that involvement in this setting is disrespectful to the teacher.

Third, we examined the impact of factors that might increase or decrease different types of parent involvement. Specifically, we thought that parents who reported high levels of economic stress and other barriers associated with poverty would show lower levels of parent involvement in all domains. Finally, we tested whether parent characteristics including self-efficacy and communication skills might predict higher parent involvement above and beyond the impact of parent economic stress and demographic factors. Ultimately, we intended to study whether various dimensions of parent involvement are compromised when parents report having difficulty in overcoming a language barrier.

## SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODS

Latino parents of children enrolled in Head Start programs who expressed interest in an adult literacy and parenting program were eligible for this study. A total of 63 Latino parents participated in the study representing a variety of countries of origin including Ecuador (30.2%), Brazil (20.7%), Mexico (20.6%), Honduras (17.5%), Peru (4.8%), Colombia (3.2%), and Puerto Rico (1.6%). Participants' median length of residency in the US was six years (range = 1—20 years; mode = six years) and 95% of the sample reported living in the United States for 10 or fewer years.

This study was conducted over a three-year period in partnership with a community action agency offering Head Start services in accordance with approvals from our university institutional review board. Parents were recruited to participate through Head Start centers using various forms of communication. The intervention and parent interviews were completed with a Spanish interpreter.

All study measures were selected for their use in prior published research with Latino samples where possible and showed good internal consistency and validity. Measures included parent involvement in early childhood education (home involvement, school involvement, and home-school conferencing), parental efficacy regarding children's education, communication in educational settings, barriers to involvement, and acculturation.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

Based on Latino parents' overall scores for involvement in children's education, results suggest that participants were most involved at home, followed by participation in home-school conferencing activities. Parents were least involved in the school setting, which includes activities such as volunteering in the classroom or going on fieldtrips. Results also indicate that these domains are related: parents who tend to be involved in one domain or setting were more likely to be involved in other domains. Parental efficacy, defined as parent's belief in their ability to contribute positively to their children's educational success, was negatively related to school based involvement and native cultural identity. Communication abilities positively related to home involvement and home school conferencing, but not to school involvement. Lastly, there was a positive relation between parent efficacy and communication abilities.

Overall, parents in our study highly identified with Latino cultural values and reported moderate levels of U.S. acculturation. When parents were split into groups based on their level of acculturation to the United States, more acculturated parents showed higher levels of school involvement. In looking at what factors best predict parent involvement even when accounting for demographic and acculturation factors, parents' ability to communicate predicted higher levels of all three types of involvement, whereas parent efficacy predicted lower levels of school involvement.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study provided data on a sample of Latino immigrant parents and their associated levels of parent involvement in Head Start. One contribution of the study was to examine factors associated with parent involvement for this understudied population across the different contexts of home and school. The results suggest that our understanding of factors that promote parent involvement for Latino children is only emerging; moreover, results may differ from those obtained with samples of older Latino children and their parents.

Latino families are a heterogeneous population, defined by variability in their level of acculturation, familiarity with U.S. culture and schooling, and language competence. Additionally, Latino parents range in characteristics previously included in conceptual models of parent involvement, such as parental role construction and parent self efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Because parents' perceptions of their communication ability is related to involvement, Head Start might benefit from stronger policies endorsing the importance of using language interpreters, bilingual staff members, and translation of written materials into multiple languages. This is a tremendous challenge for programs that serve Latino and other immigrant origin children who represent many different home languages in addition to Spanish. Because communication is a variable that can be modified or enhanced, greater attention to how this process unfolds between parents with limited English proficiency and teachers/staff may result in an improvement in parent involvement in all domains.

We found that parents who endorsed their native identity as important were also reporting lower levels of self efficacy with regard to their children's education in the U.S. We believe this means that parents who have less familiarity and comfort with U.S. schools and culture may be less confident in their ability to help their children succeed in school. This finding might also reflect a Latino parent's role construction suggesting that schools are responsible for children's academic achievement, and that parental involvement in the school setting is disrespectful to teachers and their expertise (Dumas, Arriga, Begle, & Longoria 2010). Head Start programs may wish to assess parents' views on involvement and provide information about how parents play an essential role during the preschool period. Understanding how Latino parents wish to contribute to their child's development requires Head Start to engage in dialogue with these families.

An important finding, which replicates other work on Latino family involvement and has significant practice implications, is the high level of home-based involvement reported by Latino families in our study. Low levels of school involvement relative to home involvement are reported throughout the literature with Latino populations (e.g. Marinez-Lora & Quintana, 2009), and this difference emerges during preschool (McWayne et al., 2008). Because home-based involvement is a more natural fit with Latino parents' cultural beliefs, intervention strategies

might encourage and celebrate high levels of home involvement during preschool. Intervention programs that provide parent education and opportunities for modeling parent-child interactions in the home, such as Parents as Teachers, can be consistent with cultural values.

Head Start programs should carefully monitor efforts to increase school-based involvement among Latino parents. For example, providing culturally-relevant information regarding the benefits for children whose parents are involved in home and school might be effective and benefit Latino families with low levels of participation. Another example of an effective practice is teacher invitations for parent involvement (Marinez-Lora & Quintana, 2009). The process of teacher outreach to families, whether in person or via interpreters or translated written materials, may increase satisfaction and enhance the likelihood of school involvement by Latino parents (McWayne et al., 2008). Workshops that provide sustained and repeated opportunities for parents to learn about the school system and strategies for promoting child development will likely be well-received and appreciated by Latino parents, especially those that are embedded with Latino cultural values, such as *respeto* and *familismo*.

Lastly, increased attention to cultural factors might inform the design and development of culturally relevant parent involvement programs. Latino individuals may experience acculturative stress associated from exposure to different worldviews and cultural expectations (Berry, 2006). Therefore, providing opportunities for immigrant or Latino parents with children attending Head Start to support one another could be a critical element in promoting greater family involvement and home-school connection (see Mendez & Westerberg, 2012, for discussion of implementing Parent Excellence intervention with Latino parents).

Berry (2006) notes that aspects of the receiving context for immigrants (e.g. in this case, Head Start programs in the U.S.) can play a significant role in the success of families in promoting a healthy, bicultural identity for children. It is recommended that members of the Head Start community strive to embrace and not underestimate the contributions of culture made to the development and emergence of competence for Latino children. These efforts will likely involve the development and testing of new methods and practices for promoting parent engagement by Latino and other immigrant groups who enroll their children in Head Start. The take-home message from our study is that Latino parents engage in activities that promote educational success, particularly when they are able to communicate effectively with members of their children's Head Start program.

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