

Latina Mothers' Views of a Parent-to-Parent Support Group in the Special Education System

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Parent-professional partnership literature continues to emphasize the importance of including the parent voice. Spanish-speaking families are often excluded from such studies because of the language barrier. This article presents a qualitative interview study of eight Latina mothers of children with severe disabilities. All participants were members of a parent-to-parent support group available through a local community board. Data analysis revealed that the mothers identified three major benefits of the parent-to-parent support group, including (a) feeling like a family, (b) having a source of information, and (c) receiving emotional support. Findings indicated that information and assistance the parents were missing from the school system were offered through their group. Implications for educational providers and future research will be presented and discussed.

DESCRIPTORS: English learner parents, cultural and linguistic diversity, parent-school partnership, parent support groups

One hallmark of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) is the inclusion of families as active partners on their child's education team. During Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, school conferences, and any other parent-teacher interactions, parents are entitled to be integrated and engaged through the whole process beginning with the assessment/evaluation of the student through the design and delivery of educational services. Both the letter and the spirit of IDEA embraces the balance between the home and the school, highlighting the importance of both sides coming to the table together at IEP meetings. Research in the area of parent-professional collaboration, however, indicates that a power imbalance between both sides (parent and professionals) exists, particularly for families who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Harry, 1992, 2002; Harry,

Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000).

Cultural assumptions from the majority culture in the United States pervade the special education system. IDEA provisions regarding parent involvement implies that parents can use individualistic authority to advocate for their child and are savvy in the legal language (Skrtic, 1995). Both researchers and parents report the use of a language system laden with jargon that is unique to the field of special education (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). This system is described as having its own culture. Studies about parent experiences within this system describe parents as feeling lonely, confused, powerless, and overwhelmed (Turnbull et al., 2006). IEP meetings represent most exchanges between parents and school district personnel, yet these meetings typically include numerous school officials who use technical language to describe the child through a deficit/medical model; that is, they use medical jargon to compare the child with a typically developing child and focus on the skills he or she cannot perform rather than what he or she can do. This language is contrary to many cultural values (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Soodak & Erwin, 1995). Even parents who represent the majority culture report feelings of inadequacy, including power struggles with the school district (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). These parents typically demonstrate passive IEP participation when it comes to discussing and recommending services (Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008). Thus, it should be no surprise that participation in the special education system is even more difficult and discouraging for parents who come from minority groups (Harry, 2002).

Minority Parent Experiences With the System

Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) followed African American parents in a 3-year longitudinal study in an effort to analyze deterrents to parental advocacy because of an existing stereotype that African American parents demonstrate a low level of parent involvement. The 24 families who participated in the study were interviewed

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and observed regarding their interactions with school personnel. The authors reported that 12 of the families participated for all 3 years, 6 participated for 2 years, and 6 participated only in the first year. Barriers identified by the researchers included (a) inflexible scheduling and late notices, (b) limited time allocated to meetings, (c) emphasis on documents rather than participation, (d) jargon use, and (e) power structure conflicts. Studies of Latino families have noted similar experiences with the school system, including a mistrust of teachers and overall dissatisfaction with the educational and service delivery made available to their children (Bailey, Skinner, Rodriguez, Gut, & Correa, 1999; Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). More recently, Shapiro, Monzo, Rueda, Gomez, and Blancher (2004) conducted a qualitative study of low-income Latina mothers of young adults with developmental disabilities about their relationships with educational and service delivery systems. Findings revealed a “cultural disconnect” that persuaded the mothers to adopt what the authors referred to as *alienated advocacy*. The authors described this term further by saying the mothers reported feeling “compelled to adopt a position of advocacy for their child” (p. 46) because of the lack of support they experienced when dealing with the educational and service delivery system. These mothers expressed that they were alone in their positions without support from the systems and consequently felt they had to be hostile when advocating for their child. The mothers in this study also described the following parent–professional barriers exhibited by the education and service delivery systems: poor communication and a lack of information, low effort in providing services, negative attitudes toward the children, and negative treatment of parents. Finally, Blacher, Shapiro, Lopez, and Diaz (1998) studied 148 Latina mothers of children with intellectual disability noting that 50% of the participants were categorized as depressed. The notion that mothers of such children could perhaps be more likely to become depressed and may also be placed in situations where the education system is unhelpful and requires that such parents take an isolated stance when advocating for their child (Shapiro et al., 2004) indicates a potential need for parent support specifically designed for families who come from such minority groups.

Promoting Parent Involvement for Minority Parents

Research has demonstrated that there is a relationship between parent involvement and a child’s educational and behavioral performance (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Koegel, Koegel, & Schreibman, 1991; Spann, Kohler, & Soehsen, 2003). After all, when a parent is able to collaborate with teachers, to advocate for his or her child’s needs, and to understand how to integrate interventions between the home and the school, it only makes sense that there will be educational continuity. Hoover-Dempsey

and Sandler (1997) identified common areas that contribute to parent participation, including (a) the construction of the parent role, (b) a parent’s sense of efficacy, and (c) a parent’s perception of invitations and involvement from the school. However, when parents come from a minority culture, speak a different language, and are unfamiliar with the system, parent participation can be very difficult without a medium to empower them to do otherwise.

Researchers interested in working with families to promote parent–school partnerships have identified *family support* as one effective solution (Turnbull et al., 2006). Family support has been defined as “formal and informal efforts to strengthen families’ capacities to facilitate autonomy, inclusion, care, and a satisfying quality of life for family members with disabilities while maintaining family well-being” (Singer, 2002, p. 148). Within the purview of family support, connecting families of children with disabilities who may have similar experiences together has been found to have positive social and emotional outcomes (Singer, Marquis, Powers, Santelli, & Devenere, 1999; Singer & Powers, 1993). In fact, parent-to-parent support has also been identified as one way to reduce conflict between parents and school districts (Mueller et al., 2008). Having another source of emotional support from someone who has shared similar experiences can be extremely beneficial for families alike.

Undoubtedly, culturally and linguistically diverse parents represent a unique population who require specific strategies to promote their involvement with the U.S. special education system (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1992; Chavkin & Garza-Lubeck, 1990; Harry, 1992, 1999, 2002; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Kalyanpur, 1998). Various research-based models have emerged intended to promote and to investigate parent participation for such families (Kasahara & Turnbull, 2005; Wang, McCart, & Turnbull, 2007). To date, there are no studies of Latina mothers’ experiences with parent support groups. Because research has shown that parent-to-parent support can be beneficial for families representing the majority culture (Singer et al., 1999; Singer & Powers, 1993), it is worth evaluating the outcomes for families who come from minority cultures as well. Such information may provide school professionals with potential intervention strategies to promote parent participation from families who represent this unique population.

In this study, we interviewed eight Latina mothers who were born outside the United States, spoke Spanish as their native language, had children with severe disabilities, and belonged to a Spanish-speaking family support group. The research question guiding this study was the following: What were the mothers’ experiences with the parent support group? The authors wanted to see if the support group that these mothers belonged to had similar or different outcomes (i.e., social and emotional benefits) than those of other parents from mainstream cultures represented in the family support literature.

Methods

Participant Selection

Spanish-speaking parents of children with severe disabilities were recruited for this study. Upon hearing about a Spanish-speaking parent group in the Rocky Mountain region, two of the authors of this study attended a group meeting and presented all of the 25 present members with information about the study and asked for their participation. Eleven parents from the support group originally agreed to participate in the study, including one father; however, when scheduling interviews, a total of eight mothers were able to participate in the study. All parents were provided with a \$10 gift card from a local retail store for their time.

Some critical demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 1. All eight mothers spoke Spanish as their primary language. The participants' years in the United States ranged from 4 to 20+ years. Several of the mothers who had lived in the United States more than 10 years shared experiences with traveling back to their native country (i.e., Mexico) during some of the period they lived in the United States. The children of the participants ranged in ages from 4 to 16 years old. All of the children were eligible for special education services under the category of multiple disabilities and/or other health impairment (see Table 1).

Procedures

This study used qualitative methodology, specifically interviews (Patton, 1990). Interviews with all of the participants were approximately 1 to 2 hours in length and took place at the mothers' homes. All participants were interviewed in their primary language, Spanish. All of the interviews were recorded with a tape recorder. In the first part of the interviews, all of the participants were asked to describe their background, child, and move to the United States. Next, the mothers were asked to describe their familiarity with their child's education program, the type of teacher-child communication, the child-peer communication, their own satisfaction with their child's educational programming, and the parents' experiences with their support group.

Instrument

An interview protocol was used as a guide; however, the interviews were open ended, and participants were encouraged to share their experiences and thoughts outside the protocol. In an effort to promote comfort and to allow room for easy dialogue, the interviews were conducted in an informal manner taking place in the family living room, almost as if it was a conversation between the interviewer and the parent. Because one of the authors and interviewers in this study was also from Mexico, the beginning of many of the interviews consisted of the interviewer and participant talking about their native country and identifying any similar experiences they may have had. This dialogue allowed the interviewer and the mothers to become comfortable with each other before the actual interview. In this case, the researcher's role was much like the instrument (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). See Appendices A and B for Spanish and English translation interview protocol.

Data Analysis

Each interview was audiotaped. Interview analysis included several steps. During the interviews, field notes were taken. After the interviews, the interviewers (second and third author) listened to the audiotapes and transcribed them into eight categories. The categories included (a) background information, (b) parents' familiarity with instructional programming, (c) teacher-child communication, (d) child-peer communication, (e) parent satisfaction, (f) parent-to-parent support, (g) parent advice for parents of children with special needs, and (h) parent experience with factors that can impact the experience of parents of children with special needs.

The first author independently coded each transcript for the identification of any data patterns or themes. This was accomplished by separating the data into smaller pieces of meaningful information then labeling the smaller set with a qualitative description or "code." Afterward, a code list was created. Next, the code list was analyzed and collapsed into larger themes. To safeguard credibility, 25% of the interview data were randomly chosen and coded by an independent researcher with access to the code dictionary. The first author and the second author

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name ^a	Years in United States	Child's age (years)	Child's disability
Juanita	16	11	Cerebral Palsy, nonverbal, using a G-tube
Raquel	10	8	Down syndrome, nonverbal, vision loss
Monica	4	5	Multiple disabilities, heart condition, cleft pallet, speech and language needs
Nelly	15	16	Multiple disabilities, deaf, mobility issues, seizure disorder
Elvira	10	9	Multiple physical and cognitive disabilities (visual impairment, cognitive delay, motor problems)
Roberta	5	4	Cerebral palsy and visual impairments
Miriam	20+	13	Multiple disabilities (chromosomal disorder)
Natalia	10	8	Down syndrome, hearing and vision loss

^aAll names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

then compared the coded interview data to discuss any agreements or disagreements in the analysis. There were no disagreements over the codes.

Support Group Description

The support group the mothers belonged to was specifically created for Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities who lived within the local community board boundaries. At the time of the study, the current members were estimated to be between 25 and 30 parents. The group was organized by a woman who spoke Spanish and worked for the local community board. The group was unique in that it was designed to provide support, education, and leadership opportunities for the families involved. Any family member was invited to join; however, the group consisted primarily of mothers and fathers. The group met monthly through the year with a vacation in the summer months. However, they did have an annual family summer barbecue in the month of June. The monthly meetings allotted time for parents to share and talk as well as occasionally inviting a guest speaker who presented information in Spanish. For example, during the time of the study, they had recently invited a psychologist who spoke about the stresses and depression that can be associated with caring for a child with severe disabilities. Speaker topics were selected and organized by a smaller group of five parents who belonged to the group and were referred to as the *mesa directive* (presiding committee). During the group meetings, food and child care for the children with disabilities and their nondisabled siblings were provided. The meetings took place at a local church that provided ample space for a parent meeting with the child care close by.

Results

Parent Satisfaction With Special Education Services

When talking with the mothers about their level of satisfaction with their child's school, most of the parents were satisfied with the educational services the children were receiving in the schools and of their own inclusion as team members. One mother described this relationship best by saying, "Perfectamente trabajamos como un equipo" (We perfectly work as a team). Another mother commented on her child's teacher by saying: "Estoy bien contenta porque hacen un trabajo excelente... las maestras trabajan muy duro con mi hijo y con otros niños ... están al pendiente de ellos" (I am very happy because they (the teachers) do an excellent job... the teachers work very hard with my son and the other kids... they are looking after them). One mother also described her child's teacher as "loving" and "caring." All of the parents reported that they are able to communicate with their child's teacher through an interpreter. In some cases, the paraprofessionals assigned to their child's classroom also spoke Spanish and became the main source of communication for the families.

When discussing parent satisfaction, two parents spoke about the difference in cultural values between themselves and the teachers, commenting that the teachers tended to protect the children more than the mothers' felt the children needed. One mother commented:

Aquí, a los niños les adaptan todo y eso no me gusta porque no hay nada que les haga adaptarse por si solos

Here, they adapt everything to the kids and I do not like that because there is nothing that makes them adapt for themselves.

Another mother described the overprotection when sharing a story about her child coming home from school wearing a lot of clothing, adding that he would even wear sweaters that were not his. This mother felt that there was no need to overprotect the kids.

Parent Experiences With the Support Group

During the interviews the parents spoke about their child's education and their own satisfaction; however, most the parents were the most verbose when asked to talk about their support group. It was clear that the group was highly valued by all of the mothers. Data analysis revealed that the mothers identified three major benefits of the family-to-family support group, including (a) feeling like a family, (b) having a source of information, and (c) receiving emotional support. Each theme will be described in detail in the following sections.

Feeling Like a Family

The findings indicated that the parents regarded their support group much like a family. These mothers stated that their districts did not provide any kind of support group/networking opportunities for Spanish-speaking families; therefore, they highly regarded the many opportunities their support group provided them. The mothers talked about the daily stresses they endure as a parent of a child with severe needs. Further, these parents talked about the language barrier when living in the United States and their need to have an outlet to talk about their experiences with other people. The mothers talked about feeling "alone" in the system before joining the support group. When analyzing the interviews, it was clear that this group regarded each other as family members. Although they were not related, they still felt that because they shared such similar experiences and spoke each others' language, they were there for each other as if they were their own family. This translated into a very trusting relationship. One mother talked about her experience with her "family" by saying:

Es nuestra raza, nuestro modo de comer, nuestro modo de ser. Antes no nos podíamos comunicar, nadie hablaba Inglés, y si era triste porque como

que nadie nos escuchaba y ahorita cualquier persona que se invita se escucha porque la mayoría habla español. Es muy bonito porque nos sentimos más en familia.

It is our own race, our way of eating, our mode of being. Before, when the other parent group was only in English we were not able to communicate, nobody spoke Spanish, it was very sad because it was like if nobody was listening to us and now, any person that is invited is listened to because the majority speaks Spanish. It is great because we feel like a family.

The mothers talked further about the emotional experience of having such “family support.” One mother stated:

Ahí se escucha uno al otro, se da ánimos uno al otro, o sea siempre hace falta con quien hablar, hace falta un grupo donde haya gente igual a uno. Porque no es lo mismo ir a cualquier grupo, o sea, a cualquier reunión o a cualquier fiesta. O sea, es donde todos nos entendemos, donde todos sabemos los problemas diferentes, unos chicos o grandes, pero todo nos comprendemos porque tenemos un problema en sí. Es un grupo como de familia, no como de amigos, es de familia porque nos familiarizan, las enfermedades nos familiarizan. O sea, somos como todos iguales, nos sentimos iguales. O sea, si vamos a un grupo que no es así, que es un grupo normal de cualquier gente, esos grupos no son cómodos, porque no nos comprenden porque no saben las necesidades por las que estamos pasando nosotros y nuestros hijos y ahí no, ahí todos nos comprendemos las necesidades de cada uno. O sea es un grupo muy especial para nosotros como hispanos porque en realidad el hispano no había tenido tanto apoyo ... menos en México. En México no hay ningún apoyo para niños con necesidades especiales. Aquí, bueno, nos sentimos que alguien nos escucha entonces hablamos de diferentes cosas, hablamos de la familia, de los hermanos, de los niños, de todo de las enfermedades de nuestros hijos, de diferentes enfermedades. Es muy bonito porque es una familia en sí.

In our group we listen to each other, we cheer each other up. I mean, there is always a need to have someone to talk to. There is the need of a group where there are people just like you. Because it is not the same to go to any group, I mean, to any meeting or any party. I mean, it is where we all understand each other, where we know the different problems, some little or big, but we all understand each other because we have a problem in common. It is a group like family, not like friends, it is like family because the disabilities make us family, I mean, we are all equal, we feel equal, I

mean, if we go to a group that is not like this one, a normal group of any people, those groups are not comfortable, because there they do not understand us because they do not know the needs we and our kids are going through, and in there (parent group) it is not like that. There we all understand the needs of each other. I mean, it is a very special group for us Hispanics because, to tell the truth, Hispanics have not had a lot of support ... much less in Mexico. In Mexico there is no support for kids with special needs. Here, well, we feel that someone listens to us, thus we speak of many things ... we talk about the family, of the siblings, of the kids, of the different disabilities of our kids. It is beautiful because it is a family in itself.

Source of Information

All of the mothers also talked about the information gained through their membership in the support group. In fact, one mother commented that she felt more Latina families ought to be involved in support groups because of the information gained. During the interviews, it became very apparent that there were two major forms of information provided to the families: professional and practical.

Professional

As stated earlier, the presiding committee planned and invited guest speakers to talk with the group about various educational topics. These guest speakers were regarded as professionals in the field and provided an “educational topic” for the parents. In fact, at one of the meetings, two of the mothers learned about a program to become a certified nursing assistant. Upon learning this information, both mothers went through the program, and one is now working at her home as the nursing assistant for her son and is being paid for it. Parents also shared that they learned a great deal about the “system” through their group. Information pertaining to their child’s health and well-being was addressed, such as Medicaid, Social Security Income, and acquiring therapy services. One mother shared that the group provides “a lot of information.” These mothers also talked about learning about scholarship opportunities for child care through the group. One mother shared that she was able to learn about financial support and receive respite care for her child.

Practical advice

One mother referred to another type of information gained through the group as “consejos prácticos” (practical advice). When talking about this type of information, one mother explained the following about their group meetings:

Hablamos de nuestros hijos y de las inquietudes que tenemos. Nos damos consejos y compartimos

nuestras experiencias. Compartimos lo que les gusta a nuestros hijos y lo que no les gusta, y como van en la escuela. También compartimos nuestras experiencias medicas. Nos conocemos por muchos años.

We talk about our children and our concerns for them. We give each other advice and share our experiences. We share our children's likes and dislikes and how they are doing in school. We also share our children's medical experiences. We know each other for many years.

These mothers talked about the invaluable information they have learned from one another. One parent attributed the success of the group to the Spanish-speaking forum, including the group's facilitator.

Emotional Support

All of the mothers shared stories of the emotional support the group provided. One mother mentioned that being a parent of a child with disabilities is a lot of work. She shared that children with disabilities have different needs and meeting parents who understand all of those challenges is very helpful emotionally.

Nos ayudamos bastante emocionalmente, nos divertimos, conocemos mas familias, a otros niños y como nos dan listas con los teléfonos, podemos hablarnos para conversar. Han salido muchas cosas buenas de este grupo.

We help each other emotionally a lot, we have fun, we meet more families, other kids, and since we are given lists with contact information, we can call each other. Many good things have come out from this group.

Another mother shared a similar experience:

El grupo me ayudó mucho porque a veces uno se siente solo. Toda mi familia esta en México, yo tengo aquí solamente a mi esposo y la familia de él... familiares de él. Y pues ya, a veces uno piensa que no'mas uno solo tiene problemas y que nadie más tiene. Ahí se da uno cuenta que hay personas que tienen problemas todavía mas grandes que nosotros y nos apoyamos. Ahí hicimos mucha amistad... ahí nos hicimos amigas por teléfono, hablando, platicando. Si ya nos conocemos muchas personas que vamos ahí.... Si nos ha ayudado mucho ese grupo.

The group helped me a lot because sometimes one feels very lonely. All my family is in Mexico, here I only have my husband and his family.... His relatives. And sometimes one thinks that one is the only one who has problems and that nobody else has

problems. There (in the group) one realizes that there are people with much bigger problems than ours and we all support each other. There we made a lot of friendships... we made girlfriends over the phone, talking and conversing. Yeah, many of the people that go there already know each other.... That group has really helped us.

Similarly another mother added:

No me siento sola, a veces los padres pensamos que nada mas nosotros somos los que tenemos dificultades con nuestros hijos porque es mas difícil cuidara un niño especial. Ahora soy diferente en mi manera de pensar, soy mas humilde.

I do not feel alone, sometimes we as parents think that we are the only ones who have difficulties with our children because it is more difficult to take care of a child with special needs. Now I think differently, I am more humble.

When talking with these mothers, it was very clear that the support group was a family to them that provided the information and emotional support they needed.

Discussion

This study compliments other research demonstrating the benefits of parent-to-parent support literature (Santelli, Turnbull, Marquis, & Lerner, 1997; Singer et al., 1999; Singer & Powers, 2003; Turnbull et al., 2006). The intent of this study was to focus on the support group experiences of Latina mothers' of children who have severe disabilities. Because of the language barrier and access to this underrepresented group of parents, this is one of the few studies conducted in this area. Up until now, family support literature has provided little or no empirical information about how Latina parents of children who have severe disabilities feel about support groups.

Findings indicated that the most support and information the mothers' received was through the support group rather than through school districts or relations with teachers. In addition, qualitative observations showed the parents were much more animated and talkative when speaking about the group compared with questions about their child's teachers. Themes describing the major benefits of the family-to-family support group included (a) feeling like a family, (b) having a source of information, and (c) receiving emotional support.

It was interesting to hear many of the mothers refer to the parent group as "a family." These mothers felt very close to the other families and their children and clearly regarded them as much closer than a friend. These mothers showed that a support group has the ability to foster a close network for parents who share similar

cultural values and live in a foreign country. The structure of the group allowed the mothers to feel comfortable with sharing information and developing close ties to one another. Because many of the mothers talked about their extended family living in their native country, it appeared as though the other families' common cultural experiences translated into feeling as though the mothers had more family in the United States than they had before they joined the group. One mother best described this connection when she referred to the group as "our own race."

In addition to the feeling of having family, these mothers added that they gained emotional support and information that was valuable to their child rearing and overall child care. The information gained by the mothers was knowledge that essentially allowed the mothers to learn to navigate the educational, legal, and medical systems in the United States. For example, these mothers talked about acquiring scholarships, attending nursing school to care for their child, gaining respite access, navigating the Medicaid system, and social security income, among others. All of these systems can be quite daunting and are created in a way that assumes parents have the knowledge to enter and to navigate the system independently (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). All of this information is what researchers refer to when discussing the deterrents to minority parent participation in special education (Harry, 2002). These mothers identified the group as an information vehicle that allowed them to learn their way through the system. This finding is very relevant for today's professionals as they interact with culturally and linguistically diverse families who may not have such networking opportunities.

Overall, this study points to a need for more support groups that can be made available to minority groups and are essentially composed of families who are similar in nature. All of the mothers felt that they were better parents because of their group. They acknowledged learning new material that helped them support their children with severe disabilities in their schools. These parents also reported satisfaction with their child's educational programming and their own ability to collaborate with their child's education team.

Limitations

As with most qualitative research, it is difficult to generalize this study to the larger population. This study contained a small number of parents ($N = 8$). Interpretations of the findings must be made within the realm of this study. We cannot maintain that the information and experiences that were shared by these mothers could be generalized to all Latina mothers of children with severe disabilities. Second, the parents also belonged to one support group located in one area. The findings were specific to the culture of the support group they belonged to and the issues they faced within their community. Nevertheless, the findings tell the story of eight Latina mothers'

experiences with the education system and of acquiring support from other families. The study provides the field of special education with a starting point for further inquiry.

Future Research

Future studies that look at the relationship between parent support group membership and parent participation in the schools would be most beneficial. Such studies could inform the field about specific practices that promote or deter active parent involvement. Research geared toward implementing strategies to break cultural barriers for minority families would be equally telling. Qualitative studies such as this should continue to explore parent perceptions and experiences with the special education system so that teachers and educational providers can walk away with a greater understanding of intervention ideas. Latina mothers' voices as well as other culturally and linguistically diverse families ought to be shared with the educational community so that parent-school collaboration can be promoted across all cultural lines.

Implications for Practice

Westling (1996) reviewed 25 empirical studies about parent satisfaction, parent needs, and parent relations within the special education system. The findings indicated that parents suggested school officials should involve parents more, particularly those parents who are minorities. Parents also reported a need for more information about student placement issues, special education law, disciplinary procedures, and criteria for placement. It is important to note that these were studies of parents who primarily represented the majority cultures. Westling's study and other research have pointed out the need for more research and interventions aimed specifically to support families who come from minority groups (Harry, 2002; Marion, 1982; Shapiro et al., 2004; Singer, 2002).

Turnbull et al. (2006) reported 600 active parent-to-parent programs local and statewide with at least one in every state. Although there are many parent-to-parent programs available, it is unclear as to how many are available to parents who represent culturally and linguistically diverse cultures. Also, we do not know the number of support groups similar in nature to the one in this study. In fact, all of the parents in this study shared that their child's school district did not provide them with any type of parent-to-parent support. Further, several of the mothers shared that the group was their only contact with other parents from Mexico who had children with special needs. Despite the fact that family-to-family or parent-to-parent support is recognized in the literature and has been proven to be beneficial, it is still not a common practice used in school districts.

The notion that school districts could locally move toward facilitating parents with such support is intriguing.

It could be very beneficial for districts to assist with the formation of such groups and to provide families with networking opportunities. Ideally, such partnerships could promote parent participation as well as collaboration with the district. It is recommended that school districts and other educational agencies consider creating groups that are unique to the population of the parents they serve. Providing parents with the opportunity to join such a unit could be pivotal to fostering emotional support for families. As the mothers stated in this study, belonging to a group of people who share similar experiences can be much like adding to “your own family,” which could be invaluable.

In addition to the use of a support group for emotion support, it was evident in this study that the mothers valued receiving information and learning skills that are needed to navigate the educational system. This finding points to a need for educational agencies to provide parents with relevant information about special education. Empowering families with such knowledge could potentially impact the parents’ level of involvement. Information could be presented in the form of presentations made in the native language, providing jargon-free written information, pairing parents who are new to the educational system with an experienced parent of a similar background (e.g., parent-to-parent support), making a telephone hotline available for families to call in with questions, and basically any other practice that provides parents with opportunities to learn more about the system.

There is no question that parents who represent the minority culture face a major deterrent to active parent participation and advocacy when they are left without knowledge and support with regard to the special education system. When such parents are left to find their way within the system independently, it can create a major wedge between parent–professional partnerships. Unfortunately, the child involved is the person who is ultimately affected. It is our hope that this study provides researchers and educational providers with a view of these mothers’ experiences so that our field can begin to create opportunities for all parents to feel support and acquire knowledge.

Appendix A: Parent Interview Protocol in English

1. Parents’ Familiarity With Instructional Program

- Who has provided you information about your child’s educational program?
- What do you know about how your child is being educated?
- Tell me about your IEP experiences? Were you able to contribute your ideas about your child’s education?

- How do you communicate with your child’s teacher about their planning for instruction? What language(s) are teachers using for instruction?
- How do teachers let you know about your child’s progress, concerns, or any other school-related information? (e.g., letters, telephone calls, etc.)?
- In addition to your child’s teacher, does anyone else from school communicate with you?

2. Teacher–Child Communication

- What type of native language materials does your child have access to?
- Does your child’s teacher use or make an attempt to communicate with your child in his or her native language?
- Do you have any concerns about the communication experiences/exposure your child experiences at school?
- How do you think your child’s progress would be different if teachers were to use your child’s native language?
- Has the topic of using your child’s native language ever been discussed?

3. Child–Peer Communication

- What opportunities, if any, do you feel your child has at school to interact with other children who speak the same native language?
- Do you feel that your child’s teacher or administrators encourage or discourage interaction among children who speak a language other than English?

4. Parent Satisfaction

- How does your child’s instructional program allow or not allow you to participate?
- How do teachers and/or administrators’ personalities help you or hinder your participation in your child’s program?
- How satisfied are you with your child’s educational programming?
- In your opinion, how do you feel your child’s teacher or administration is trying to promote or maintain the culture of your child?

5. Parent-to-Parent Support

- Do you know other parents’ of children who have children with the same educational needs as your child? How did you meet them?
- Have the teachers and/or administrators helped you in meeting other parents with children who have the same educational needs as your child?

- Does your child's school sponsor meetings for parents? If so, what is the nature of the meetings? Have you attended?

Appendix B: Parent Interview Protocol in Spanish

Protocolo para Entrevistas con los Padres de Estudiantes del Idioma Inglés

1. Conocimientos de los padres acerca del programa educativo
 - ¿Quién le ha proporcionado información sobre el programa educativo de su hijo?
 - ¿Qué sabe usted acerca de la forma en que se está educando a su hijo?
 - Cuénteme sobre sus experiencias con el Programa de Educación Individualizada (en inglés, IEP). ¿Pudo usted contribuir con sus ideas acerca de la educación de su hijo?
 - ¿Cómo se comunica con el maestro de su hijo acerca de la forma en que se planifica la instrucción que recibirá éste? ¿Qué idioma o idiomas están utilizando los maestros para impartir la instrucción?
 - ¿Cómo le informan a usted los maestros acerca de los avances de su hijo, sus inquietudes u otra información relacionada con la escuela (p. ej., por medio de cartas, llamadas por teléfono, etc.)?
 - Además del maestro de su hijo, ¿se comunica con usted algún otro representante de la escuela?
2. Comunicaciones entre el maestro y su hijo
 - ¿A qué tipo de materiales en su lengua materna tiene acceso su hijo?
 - ¿Utiliza el maestro la lengua materna de su hijo, o hace un esfuerzo por comunicarse con él en su lengua materna?
 - ¿Tiene usted inquietudes acerca de las experiencias o la exposición de su hijo en lo relacionado con las comunicaciones?
 - ¿De qué manera cree usted que sería diferente el grado de avance de su hijo si los maestros utilizaran la lengua materna de su hijo?
 - ¿Se ha discutido alguna vez el asunto del uso de la lengua materna de su hijo?
3. Comunicaciones entre su hijo y sus iguales
 - ¿Cuáles oportunidades cree usted que tiene su hijo en la escuela para interactuar con otros niños que hablan la misma lengua materna?
 - ¿Cree usted que los maestros de su hijo o los administradores de la escuela incentivan o desincentivan la interacción entre los niños que hablan un idioma distinto al inglés?
4. Satisfacción de los padres
 - ¿De qué manera permite o no permite el programa educativo de su hijo la participación de usted?
 - ¿De qué manera ayuda u obstaculiza la personalidad de los maestros y/o de los administradores la participación de usted en el programa de su hijo?
 - ¿Qué tan satisfecho está usted con la programación educativa de su hijo?
 - ¿Cómo cree que el maestro de su hijo o los administradores de la escuela están tratando de fomentar o preservar la cultura de su hijo?
5. Apoyo entre padres
 - ¿Conoce usted a otros padres que tengan hijos con las mismas necesidades educativas de su hijo? ¿Cómo los conoció?
 - ¿Le han ayudado a usted los maestros y/o los administradores a conocer a otros padres con hijos que tienen las mismas necesidades educativas de su hijo?
 - ¿Patrocina la escuela de su hijo reuniones para padres? De ser así, ¿cómo son estas reuniones? ¿Ha asistido usted?

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