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Obstacles and Strategies: A Multicase Study of Three Mexican Mothers' Involvement in Education

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After the teacher conference Guadalupe's face was full of pride. Smiling, she looked at me and said, "You see, I am really working with my child."

Research shows the positive impact of family involvement on children's education (Abrego, Rubin, & Sutterby, 2006; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Quezada, Díaz, & Sanchez, 2003; Osterling, Violand-Sanchez, & Vacano, 1999; Zentella, 2005). When families get involved in school activities, working at home with their children and having good parent-school communication, they promote better education for their children (Abrego, Rubin, & Sutterby, 2004; Quezada, Díaz, & Sanchez, 2003). But for Latino families, it not always is easy to be involved in school activities, especially if they are not well informed of the school's expectations. Integration may not be an easy task for them, particularly because their perceptions of life, parenting, and educational practices have to be accommodated to the practices in the new community. These different practices and norms do not make sense for many immigrant families. In Mexico for example, public schools often do not allow families

into their children's classroom. Consequently, families do not know how to participate in their children's education as it is expected in the US public school system. Therefore, Mexican Immigrant families need support to acquire vocabulary and literacy practices that better fit the expectations from the school system in United States.

Literature Review

The number of Hispanics in the United States is expected to reach 60 million by 2020, amounting to 18 % of the growing population (Zentella, 2005). In order to improve education for this population, it has been suggested that government officials, researchers, educators, and the school system must develop more efficient ways of teaching, as well as more meaningful learning activities that engage students and respect their cultural background (Kucer, 2009; Váldez 1996). Schools must respect and value the culture and language that children bring to the classroom (Kucer, 2009; Váldez 1996; Zentella, 2005).

Zentella states, "Parents are accused of not helping with homework or the learning of English, not attending school parent-

teacher meetings, and not reading to children or providing books” (2005, p.13). Lauro Cavazos, former Secretary of Education, stated that Latino parents do not attend parent-teacher conferences, do not know how to participate in school activities such as reading or doing homework, and do not help their children speak English (Suro, 1990). However, immigrant families do bring important life experiences and cultural values that schools can incorporate into children’s education.

Abrego, Rubin, & Sutterby (2006) explained how University of Texas researchers worked with Hispanic families and preservice teachers in order to prepare teachers to work with families before they start working in elementary schools. Their research indicated that teachers who are in constant communication with families have a better understanding and more respect for the families who participated in the program. Conversely, teachers who do not have communication with families tend to think that parents do not care about their children’s education. Abrego and her colleagues studied the Reading Tutoring Program, which included ten weekly sessions with families. First, preservice teachers modeled reading practices in front of parents, then parents worked by themselves with their children. The research showed that parents participated actively with their children’s education. Parents also showed respect and appreciation for the preservice teachers for teaching them how to read aloud to their children. Most of the preservice teachers in the project spoke Spanish, but in some cases they only spoke English. Nonetheless, they were still able to communicate with Spanish-speaking families. Since preservice teachers and families had the same goal - children’s success in education- they

worked as a team and language was not a barrier. The authors concluded that teachers need to learn how to work with families and encourage parents to get actively involved in their students’ education. This program showed respect for families involved with the literacy program.

Previous research has pointed out the active role that mothers have in their children’s education as role models who pass on traditional values. Similarly, research has indicated the factors that mothers have to confront in order for their families to be successful (Farver, Xu & Eppe, 2006; Fuller et al., 2009; Relaño Pastor, 2005). The present study extends recent research on Latino families by focusing on factors that help and hinder their participation in school activities, and on how Mexican mothers in particular understand parent involvement. While earlier research has mentioned the importance of parent involvement with school activities and identifies steps to encourage families’ participation, this study takes into account the points of view of three Mexican mothers regarding the difficulties they have to confront before they can get more actively involved in their children’s school.

As a family literacy coordinator, I have observed that Latino families have important background knowledge that schools should take advantage of in order to better understand students and help them develop literacy skills. Mexican immigrant families have a great knowledge of oral language and share stories with their children. We cannot undervalue oral language from Latino families because it is an important indication to early literacy (Snow, Burns, & Griffing, 1998). Parents want to participate in their children’s education but sometimes do not feel secure

participating as equals in school activities (Váldez, 1996; Zentella, 2005). I am very interested in how Mexican mothers feel when they are asked to participate in school, and what factors help or hinder them to participate in the school activities. The mothers in this study shared their experiences participating in school activities and helping their children with homework. This paper presents a close view of these mothers' attempts to work together with schools. These three Mexican mothers explained the hard work that they have to do while working with their children. Their obstacles are the language, an immense barrier to fully understanding homework, as well as schools' and programs' expectations. This study also revealed the strategies that these mothers employed in order to overcome these obstacles.

The Study

Method

This research used a multiple case study design and was guided by qualitative practices as suggested by Merriam (1988). A multiple case study allowed the researcher to investigate the particular questions related to how the Mexican mothers in the study understood their involvement in the education of their children.

Setting/Context of the study

The study was conducted during the spring of 2010 in Smith District located in a Western city where the student population is approximately 19,000. The ethnicity of the students is American Indian 1%, Asian 1%, Black 2%, Hispanic 51%, and White 44%. The percentage of students who receive free lunch is 57 percent. Twenty-five different languages are spoken by families whose children attend the District schools. The school district provided translation in Spanish, two languages of

Burma, and Somali. The Latino children whose mothers participated in this study attended Montgomery, Rincon Valley, and Pioneer Elementary Schools. These three Mexican mothers also had children attending Dolores Huerta Middle School and Abraham Lincoln High School. The study participants had limited or no English and each of them required information about school activities to be translated into Spanish.

Participants

A year ago, I taught at the Latino Family Literacy Project at Smith District that consisted of teaching family literacy classes for Hispanic families. I worked at three schools: Montgomery, Rincon Valley, and Pioneer Elementary. The project included ten sessions, with one two-hour class per week. The Family Literacy Project is an instructional program that encourages reflection and discussion by means of reading, writing, and arts projects. When I began the project, I selected three from several Mexican mothers to be the participants in this study. They were representative examples of the many Mexican mothers who are confronting challenges when working with their children at home and at school. The three participants selected were Isabel, Guadalupe, and Carmen. For purposes of confidentiality, I am using pseudonyms for my participants as well as for the names of the schools.

Isabel: When I met Isabel I was very surprised about her enthusiasm to learn. Isabel's father came to United States as an agricultural worker with legal permission to work. After some years her father applied for citizenship for the rest of his family and then all of his family moved legally to United States. Isabel came 18 years ago from Durango, Mexico. When she arrived

she got her GED, she wanted to keep studying but she got married after two years and her husband did not allow her to continue her studies. Isabel has three children, one in middle school and two in elementary school. Isabel defined herself as a supportive mother and wife. She is the one who is in charge of her children's education because her husband works all day. Isabel had been a volunteer in school but most of the work with her children is completed at home.

When I asked her to participate in this study she was very excited and she answered, "If my experiences as a Mexican mother count, why not?" So, her participation in this research always was very optimistic and positive despite the limited free time she had between taking care of her children and her job.

Guadalupe: I met her in a family literacy class at a different school. She finished middle school in Mexico before coming to the United States nine years ago with her two older children. She decided to come to this country because her husband was working here and she wanted her family to be together. However, the decision to come to this country was not easy because they did not have legal documentation. As she explained, "I just asked God for help while we were crossing the border and I prayed for my daughters to arrive safe with their father." Guadalupe had five children, between the ages of 17 and one. She worked in the onion fields, which is a seasonal job, so she always needed extra money for her children. Furthermore, her husband was deported at the beginning of 2010 and she now had additional problems to encounter. Guadalupe's children attended high school, middle school and elementary school. Although many things

were happening in her life, she agreed to participate in this research.

Carmen: I also met Carmen in a family literacy class. Although she did not have transportation she always was on time for class with her children. She came to the United States ten years ago without legal documentation and had a terrible experience crossing the border. Carmen finished elementary school in Mexico. She has four children, the oldest one lives in Mexico and the other three were born in the United States. Carmen and her husband were not living together anymore because she was a victim of domestic violence. She worked as a babysitter in her own home and was an active volunteer in her children's school. When I asked her if she would like to participate, she was not sure. She thought that she would not be able to say anything interesting for the study. However, when she decided to participate, she was very excited and she always made time for the interviews.

Data Collection

Data collection started the third week of February and ended the third week of March 2010. During the data collection time, I conducted three to four interviews with each participant in their homes. Each visit lasted two to three hours. I also went to observe participants in their parent-teacher conferences. Information about each participant's involvement in the school activities was obtained in four steps. First, I made phone calls to the Mexican mothers who participated in this study to ask for their permission to the present research. I explained to them my interest and final goals for this study. Second, I scheduled and made home visits and recorded each interview for the purpose of verifying information as needed. The interview consisted of questions that focused on

practices at mealtime, homework supervision, and communication with teachers. Third, I took detailed field notes during the interviews. Finally, I observed them while they attended the parent-teacher conference. At the parent-teacher conferences I did not record the conversations between mothers and teachers. However, I took notes and I conducted an interview as soon as possible with the participants after the conference.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed in the following way. First, patterns emerged across the interviews, observations from parent-teacher conference, and field notes. I organized them by themes. Second, I reread the same data and coded them to confirm general patterns. Later additional patterns were identified. Next, I counted the number for each pattern and frequencies that emerged in each data source. Third, I examined all my patterns and I organized them according to similarities and triangulation with my interviews, field notes, and observation in the parent-teacher conferences (Hubbard & Power, 2003).

Limitations

The main limitation of this research study was time. Most of the data collection was done within a limited time frame precluding me from gathering richer data. In addition, only three mothers participated in this study, which further limited my ability to understand the needs of other Mexican mothers who may be in a different situation.

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand the difficulties Mexican mothers face in their participation in school activities and identify factors that may help

or hinder their participation. I have organized my findings around the relevant themes that emerged from my interviews, as well as my observations and field notes. I present the factors that hindered their participation with the school and I then present the factors that promoted and helped mothers' participation. Each mother's opinions are explained in terms that captured and concentrated the information shared by these mothers when working with their children's education.

Factors that hinder mothers' school participation

Language. The three participants repeatedly expressed how much frustration they have experienced because of their limited English. They felt bad because they could not communicate with teachers or school staff. They mentioned how they had to survive without knowing English and they felt insecure when they had to attend to school meetings. Guadalupe explained:

In my children's school meetings they always provide an interpreter in Spanish. But I feel bad when the person who is conducting the meeting says, "If you need help with translation you have to change seats" I feel embarrassed because I feel like everybody is looking at me.

The three participants concurred that schools provided them with an interpreter. However, they explained that information from the classroom comes home in English, which makes it difficult for them to help their children with homework. The three of them mentioned how frustrated they felt every time they needed to read instructions for their children's homework and were unable to understand. When they tried to

speak in English the teachers looked at them as if they were saying “I do not understand you.”

Isabel said, “I learned some English when I came here to United States but it still is difficult. I know that I have a very strong accent but at least I can understand some when teachers are talking to me.” Guadalupe and Carmen have attended English classes, but they said that they “did not learn very much.” Their classes were two hours a week and sometimes they did not have people to practice their new vocabulary with and they forgot it easily. One of the participants mentioned that she bought the expensive and popular English learning program *Inglés sin Barreras* but she did not learn anything from it. The participants in this study agreed that learning English is not an easy task because when they tried to use some words in English their children made fun of them. As a result, these mothers relied on their children’s language skills. Children became a helpful tool, reading all the letters from school, listening to phone messages, and filling out forms and bills for the parents.

Immigration Status. Immigration status was one of the main obstacles in the participants’ lives in this country. As Isabel explained, “I came here because my father got legal permission to work in the United States. I am legal here and I did not have any problems finding a job or going to school.” Carmen and Guadalupe’s experiences were different. Carmen came to this country without legal documentation. She always worried that the police will arrest her. “I do not have papers to work in this country. I am afraid that the police will come and put me in jail or deport me; my children would be by themselves.” These mothers all had experiences in which families were

separated because of their immigration status. Guadalupe’s husband was deported recently and the family faced more problems than usual. She said

We came to this country because we wanted a better life for our children, but life here, it is never easy. My husband has to work every single day in order to have food for our children. Even though he works so hard, he makes little money because he is illegal too. Sometimes neither my husband nor I are able to be in school meetings because we have to work until late.

Without legal residence, these parents have faced anxiety over documentation. Guadalupe said, “I always feel vulnerable with my situation here because I feel like everybody knows my circumstances in this country.” She described her first experience with the school when she arrived to this country. When she went to enroll her children the secretary asked her for their social security numbers. She was afraid and could not answer. She ran to her children’s classroom and asked the teacher for help. Carmen said, “If you look for a job the manager always asks for your green card. And if I do not have a job I cannot give to my children the things that they need.”

Both of the participants who do not have permission to be in the United States mentioned their hopes of becoming citizens with immigration reform. If this occurs, they hoped, it would give their children a chance to go to college and to have a better life. Their immigration status was an important theme for the participants because it means to have better jobs, life without worries about deportations and to be more connected with the community.

Level of Education. Participants' education was another recurrent topic. Isabel earned her GED in the United States and felt better able to support her children's education. She knew more English than the other participants. "I feel happy because I was able to get my GED," Isabel said. "I feel more prepared to help my children with homework." She actively volunteered in school without feeling insecure. But her education and English also allowed her to get "a good job," which left her with little time to volunteer. Guadalupe finished middle school and Carmen only completed elementary school in Mexico; both had to stop their studies because their parents did not have enough money. Due to their lack of education, they felt more vulnerable and limited. Both of them had a hard time making money because of their lack of education. Carmen babysat in her house and Guadalupe worked in the onion fields. Like Isabel, they had limited extra time, and their relative poverty makes participation even more difficult.

Working with their children at home was not an easy task, especially when the husbands are out all day working. Isabel and Guadalupe mentioned that sometimes they felt frustrated with their husbands because they wanted them to be more involved with their children's education. Despite this frustration, they understood that their husbands' contribution with money was important too. Carmen's situation is worse because her husband was deported on account of domestic violence. She needed to work and attend to her children by herself. Children's education for these mothers was a responsibility that they often had to face alone. As Guadalupe mentioned "I am here already and I have to be strong for my children because they need me."

Expectations. The three mothers concurred that teachers expected much from them; however, they do not always know exactly what is expected. The language barrier and time constraints made comprehension even more difficult. They explained how frustrated and anxious they felt when teachers were talking about activities that they could not understand. Isabel recalled that when she talked to teachers with her limited English "Teachers look at me as if I were crazy." Regarding parent-teacher conferences, the participants mentioned that they expected teachers to talk about their children's development at school. They said that some of the teachers were very clear about their children's needs and explained how mothers can work at home. But sometimes these mothers did not understand what the teachers were saying or exactly what their children's problems were. As Isabel mentioned, "Teachers from my son's school put a big sign in their table saying 'Please limit your conferences to 3-5 minutes, thank you for coming tonight.'" She said how anxious she felt when teachers talked very fast and then with their body language showed her that the time was over. When the conference was over, she did not understand her son's needs.

Isabel mentioned "I feel that the school system has different expectations for us as parents and we as parents have different expectations about our responsibilities working with our children." For instance, when the teachers asked them if they had a question, the three mothers all asked, "*¿Cómo se porta mi hijo/a?*" (How does my child behave?). They explained that is very important for them to know about academic growth; but they wanted to make sure that their children behaved well with other students too. As Isabel stated, "When

I ask the teachers, how do my children behave? I am asking not only about behavior. This question contains everything. That is how I speak and understand.” However, they mentioned that teachers misunderstand the importance of this question thinking that the mothers should ask more important things like level of reading and math.

Likewise, the participants recognized the importance of working in the school as volunteers. However, none of them felt comfortable doing it. Carmen worked as a volunteer at least once a week even though she did not like it. “My experiences working as a volunteer are not good,” she says. “My son’s teacher asks me to come only because she wants to say bad things about my child’s behavior. In my opinion, it is better if parents do not go to the classrooms because then their children behave even worse.” Carmen said, “Even though I am not happy, I have to do this because it is my responsibility as a mother.”

In addition to language, immigration status, and level of education, they felt intimidated by some teachers. They mentioned how awkward they felt when they were in the classroom waiting for the teacher’s instructions and they were not able to fully understand them.

Factors that encourage mothers’ school participation

Values about education. Despite the many difficulties that they faced to be involved with their children’s education, the three mothers saw education as an important inheritance they wanted to give their children. They expressed total respect and commitment to their children’s education. They frequently mentioned the importance of education as a way to have a better life. The three of them expressed an

enormous respect for teachers and school. Mothers explained that they talk with their children about how future and school go together. Guadalupe explained, “I always tell my children if you want to have a better life than me and your father, you must study hard and be respectful with your teachers.” The mothers agreed that better educated children become better citizens. As Carmen said, “I do not want my children to begin to do or think bad things. So, I ask them to focus on school. I do not want my children to get together with boys who are only looking for trouble.” Carmen stated, “I want to give education to my children because is the only valuable thing that I will leave to them when I die.”

In one of the parent-teacher conferences, a teacher told Guadalupe, “Congratulations, your son is reading at grade level. I can see that you are working hard with him.” When the conference finished, Guadalupe’s face was full of pride. Smiling, she looked at me and said, “You see, I am really working with my child.”

The three participants mentioned how meaningful the parent-teacher conferences were in order to hear about their children’s learning. Since I observed them in the conferences, I realized that they listened to the teacher very carefully and respectfully. They nodded their heads while the teachers explained their children’s needs and strengths.

Reading. The mothers all talked about reading as an important factor of success in school. Although they did not have a reading routine as individuals, they recognized the significance of reading with their children and wanted to encourage them to read. They had a specific time and way to be involved with books in order to support their children. Isabel said, “I attended a family literacy class and we read

bilingual books. The teacher explained to us how to read at home with our children. I do not go to the public library; most of my children's books came from school. Sometimes when we go to shopping and we stop in a bookstore and if my children really like a book, we buy it. Sometimes I find cheap books at garage sales." Despite poverty and lack of formal education, the participants looked for resources to support their children education.

The mothers all stated that language made it difficult to read with their children. But even if they did not understand English they sat next to their children and listened to them when they read. One of the participants had older children who were in charge of reading to the youngest ones. All three participants had experiences with after-school programs that supported reading with their children but none of the participants was completely satisfied with them. As Isabel mentioned:

A while ago I enrolled my son in an after school program because his teacher told me. My son always was very sad and tired. I decided to take him out with the promise he would be working hard on his grades and he did it.

Attitude. In the interviews, all three participants showed a positive attitude about encouraging their children in school responsibilities. The mothers mentioned their willingness to follow the school's and the teachers' rules, although sometimes they did not agree with them. As Carmen expressed, "Anytime the teacher needs me I will be there because I really care about my Carlos." In Isabel's parent-teacher conference, I saw her willingness to follow the instructions from her son's teachers. One of the teachers told her that her son

had bad grades because he did not finish an assignment. Isabel asked the teacher how her son could get back on track with this assignment. The teachers answered, "I will help him to finish this assignment but he must be at school at 7:00 AM because that is when I have an extra time to work with him." Grateful, she promised him that her son would be on time and she would be with him. Guadalupe stated, "If the teacher or the principal calls me because something happens with my children I always be there even though I feel shy." In general the mothers agreed that if teachers need them to do something, they will do it.

Working with their children at home.

The three participants explained in the interviews how they get actively involved with their children's education. All agreed that their main responsibility as mothers is to love and feed their children. They also recognized that they had to help their children with homework, attend school meetings, and be aware of their children's necessities in general. They mentioned the activities that they do with their children to encourage them to be better students. Carmen said, "I attended a class where the teacher taught me how I could do homework with my children." Each one of the participants explained their routine with homework, and the three of them had common comments related to it. Isabel explained, "Homework is the most important thing that my children do after school. I always stop whatever I am doing and sit next to my children to supervise them when they do homework." Guadalupe, like Carmen, mentioned that each time she has a chance she takes a class on how to work with her children. Guadalupe explained that sometimes she could not understand the homework but

she made sure that her older daughters helped out the younger children.

They also found ways to integrate school into daily activities. The participants said they cooked everyday for their children and conversed at the dinner table. Mothers mentioned that they talked with their children about the day in general, children's behavior, and about the school day. Furthermore, they said that they always checked their children's backpacks for information from the school. The participants mentioned the importance of working at home because then children are better prepared in the school.

Discussion and Conclusions

This multi-case study focused on three Mexican mothers with similar but unique characteristics who are involved in their children's education. In this discussion I present my conclusions of the Mexican mothers working with their children. I then present some recommendations.

The three mothers mentioned many of the difficulties that they faced to be involved with their children's education. However, all three of them showed total respect and commitment to their children's education. The mothers responded to these difficulties with several strategies because, despite their limitations, they deeply value education.

Many educators and administrators may not understand the difficulties Mexican mothers—indeed, all poor immigrants—face. Likewise, they may not be aware of the multiple strategies these mothers employ in order to overcome their obstacles. These strategies reveal Mexican mothers' deep commitment to their children's education, even though their limited English and their insecurity

navigating a foreign environment may obscure it.

If education is a right that every child deserves, then schools must provide multiple possibilities that help them to be successful in school. When I started this research, I found multiple studies that describe family involvement as a powerful tool to prevent children's failure at school. When schools include parents in their programs, children are more successful. Teachers must recognize the background of each family and work with the knowledge that each student brings to school from home (Abrego, Rubin, & Sutterby, 2006; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Jasis & Ordonez-Jasis, 2004; Quezada, Díaz, & Sanchez, 2003; Osterling, Violand, & Vacano, 1999; Zentella, 2005). Based on previous research and this research, schools need to clarify to families exactly what they expect from them. According to these three mothers, at least, schools and families have a different way to understand what parent involvement means.

Based on the results from this research we know that Mexican mothers care about literacy; but their culture has different understandings of what participation and involvement mean. Mexican mothers care about their children's education regardless of whether they themselves are educated or not. Mothers want to support their children's instruction, but not all of them know how to do it.

Knowledgeable parents are beneficial for children because they facilitate learning. Schools need to value the culture that students bring to class. Also schools must recognize that each family has different background knowledge, social economic status, and values about education and literacy. As Relaño Pastor writes, Latina mothers "not only overcome language

barriers; they also resist them and draw a moral lesson from them, constructing a moral order that they transmit to their children” (2005, p. 160). She further explains that language is a significant problem that does not let immigrants communicate with the community. My study complements her findings by explaining the strategies that Mexican mothers employ in order to overcome the multiple obstacles to participate and be involved in school.

In conclusion, schools must provide a safe place for all families if they really want to improve the relationship between parents and communities. Schools need to respect families and show them that their cultural knowledge is important. When parents sense respect for their culture, values, and expectations, they are more willing to participate in school. When parents do not feel connected, it is difficult for them to get involved and understand school expectations.

Mexican immigrant mothers face multiples problems when they arrive in this country. These problems increase when their children go to school. These mothers struggle to help their children integrate into this new country. Instead of blaming them and their families for their lack of knowledge of school's expectations and activities, educators and schools need to provide support and recognize the mothers' values and their background knowledge. Furthermore, incorporating children's cultural values and background knowledge into the curriculum will facilitate both academic growth and parental involvement.

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