

Optimizing Home-School Collaboration: Strategies for School Psychologists and Latino Parent Involvement for Positive Mental Health Outcomes

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Public schools across the United States are experiencing an increase in Cultural and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students, particularly those of Latino descent. Latino children are at a high-risk for mental health problems (i.e., depression, anxiety, risk of suicide, etc.) and face greater risk factors when compared to many of their ethnic counterparts. School psychologists are in a unique position to support their mental health needs. However, in order to enhance mental health outcomes, home-school collaboration becomes fundamental, particularly when working with Latino families. This article will examine Latino parent definitions and educator expectations of parental involvement in school systems. Home-school collaborative inhibitors (barriers), as perceived by Latino parents, will be examined and discussed. Epstein's *Framework of Six Types of Involvement* will be adopted as an outline for fostering and sustaining home-school collaboration and overcoming identified inhibitors. Culturally and linguistically appropriate strategies based on Epstein's framework will be examined. Implications for school psychologist and educators will be discussed.

KEYWORDS: Cultural and linguistic diversity (CLD), home-school collaboration, mental health, Latino, parental involvement, familismo, respeto, confianza, problem-solving model, ethnic validity, ecological perspective.

Public School Demographics

Public schools across the United States are becoming increasingly more diverse. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2008) reported that 49,293,000 children were enrolled in public schools (K-12) in 2007. Of this total, 43% were of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) backgrounds. In 2006 students enrolled in K-12 schools were identified in the following manner: 57% were non-Hispanic White, 19% were Hispanic/Latino, 16% were non-Hispanic Black, and 4% were Asian and Pacific Islander (NCES). In like manner, English Language Learners (ELLs) are becoming more common in public school systems. In 2002, 8% of all public school children were labeled ELLs (Capps et al., 2005). The top five languages spoken, by percentage, in the United States are: Spanish (79.2%), Vietnamese (2%), Hmong (1.6%), Cantonese (1%), and Korean (1%) (Kindler, 2005). Garcia and Cuellar (2006) estimated that 53% of all immigrant students were of Chicano/Latino ethnic decent. At the present time, the United States is at its most diverse point in all of its history.

Mental Health Issues in Diverse Populations

Prevalence rates of Latinos with psychiatric/mental health issues are estimated to be at 28.1% for men and 30.2% for women (Alegria et al. 2007). In a national cross-sectional study consisting of children in grades 6 to 10 (average ages 11 to 15), 22% of Latinos endorsed depressive symptoms compared to 18% of all participants in the study which included African-Americans, Caucasians, American-Indians,

and Asian-Americans (Saluja, Iachan, Sheidt, Overpeck, Sun, & Giedd, 2004). Latinos reported higher symptoms of depression across all ethnic groups except for American-Indians, which stood at 29% (Saluja, Iachan, et al., 2004). The effects of mental illness can have a negative impact on the academic success of students in general. However, Latinos are at even greater risk for negative academic impact or poor academic success. For example, in a national sample study of 2,532 CLD young adults ages 21 to 29 diagnosed with a mental health disorder, Latinos had an increased risk of dropping out of school as compared to non-Latino White students (Porche, Fortuna, Lin, & Alegria, 2011). Furthermore, in addition to negative academic impact, suicidality among Latinos has been identified as a significant concern. O'Donnel, O'Donnel, Wardlaw, and Stueve (2004) reported risk factors for suicide/suicide ideation among Latino and African-American children included depression, being female, having unmet basic needs, and engaging in same gender sexual relations.

In addition, Latino children tend to be at a higher risk for anxiety disorders in comparison to peers from other ethnicities. When compared to other ethnicities (Caucasian and African-American), Latino children (ages 2-4) tend to manifest higher levels of internalizing behaviors (i.e., anxiety), as reported by parents/caregivers on the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Recorla, 2000). McLaughlin et al. (2007) found that Latino adolescents reported higher levels of worry and separation anxiety than their Caucasian counterparts. Latinas reported higher levels of social anxiety and physical symptoms of anxiety when compared to females of other ethnicities (Chorpita et al. 1997).

According to the Latino Consortium of the Academy of Pediatrics Center for Child Health Research, limited access to mental health care, including dental and medical services, for Latino children has been considered to be “the most important and urgent priorities and unanswered questions in Latino child health” (Flores et al., 2002, p. 82). This disparity has created a gap in student access to needed resources for school-aged children. Given this urgency, school psychologists, as school-based mental health providers, are in a position to serve as a vital link between schools, homes, and mental health agencies as experts in school-based collaboration.

Risk Factors

Latino youth must overcome significant risk factors. In 2002, the poverty rate for Latinos was 21.8% compared to 12.1% for all ethnicities and 7.8% for non-Latino whites (Ramirez & De la Cruz, 2003). When considering Latino children (ages 0-17), the percentage of those living at the poverty line increases to 33.2% (Pearl, 2011).

In addition, Latinos are at greater risk for dropping out of school. The high school dropout rate for Latinos, as a whole, stood at 38% in 2008. However, for Mexican-American and Central-Americans, the percentage increases to 45% (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2009, Table 9). Dropping out of high school leads to less educated workers in the labor force, lower wages, increased crime, poorer health, and decreased political participation (Rumberger & Rodriguez, 2011). Exposure to violence is higher in homes from immigrant backgrounds (Latino, Somali, and Vietnamese) and Latinos experience three times more violence than their Caucasian counterparts (Pan et al., 2006).

Collaboration

Defining Collaboration. Outcomes are most successful when families and schools work together toward a common goal. When examining the interface of families and educational systems, the praxis of collaboration becomes “one of building and sustaining connections for these systems to support and maximize the learning potential of children” (Elser, Godber, & Christianson, 2008, p. 917). It is only when families and educators join together that an environment can be created for problem solving to occur, and in turn, the students’ probability of succeeding increase. Collaboration becomes increasingly important when mental health problems are impeding academic and social emotional progress.

More specifically, collaborative efforts within school systems involve teams composed of parents, teachers, administrators, counselors/mental health professionals, and school psychologists. These

educational teams work together to problem solve and jointly develop possible solutions. It can involve resolving behavioral, emotional, academic, or systemic issues that educators may encounter. This role can also take place within Response to Intervention (RTI) structures. According to Vaughn and Bos (2012), collaboration within an RTI framework includes the following:

- determining and implementing research-based practices;
- collecting and using ongoing data to make effective decisions for students with learning and behavior problems;
- identifying appropriate practices for differentiating instruction within the classroom and interventions; and
- communicating effectively with all key stakeholders so that appropriate instruction is provided to all students with learning and behavior [emotional] problems (p.128).

School psychologists can take a leadership role throughout the collaborative processes particularly as it relates to enhancing mental health outcomes. Because school psychologists are trained to work with families and teachers, they can take the primary role in selecting, implementing, and evaluating evidenced-based interventions at the individual, group, and systemic level. Lastly, school psychologists are trained to communicate and consult with all stakeholders both within and outside educational systems with the underlying goal of facilitating success for students.

Collaboration and Mental Health. Collaborative efforts among schools, families, and mental health professionals have been shown to enhance both academic and mental health outcomes. Collaboration among mental health providers, families, and schools for urban-minority children's efforts resulted in the reduction of mental health symptoms of the children being treated (Mckay, Gopalan, Franco, Kalogerogiannis, Umpierre, Olshtain-Mann, Bannon, Elwyn & Goldstein, 2010). School and family collaboration (e.g., communication, positive interactions, parent support groups, English Language classes, etc.) has been shown to have a positive effect on the mental health and adjustment of immigrant children (Suarez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010). Families and Schools Together (FAST) is a collaboration model that targets children ages 5 to 12 who are at risk of behavioral maladjustment. According to Ackley and Cullen (2010), FAST was shown to enhance family relationships, reduce family stress, and decreased school failure. For further discussion on family and school partnerships the reader is directed to the *Handbook on Family and Community Engagement* (Redding, Murphy, and Sheley, 2011).

When considering Latino families that are afflicted by mental health problems, collaborative alliances with educational and community mental health providers have resulted in a reduction of family stress (Garcia & Lindgren, 2009). *Familismo* (family-centered) in mental health contexts refers to family support and shared decision making when working with professionals. Ayon, Marsiglia, and Bermudez-Parsai (2010) additionally concluded that this construct, when used in treatment or intervention development, has promising outcomes of reducing barriers to accessing and working with mental health providers. In this context, encouraging family involvement and shared decision making may have a positive impact on enhancing collaborative efforts between homes and schools.

Latino Parental Involvement

Perspectives of Latino Involvement. Although there is an overabundance of research to support the positive effect that home-school collaboration has on mental health outcomes, educators continue to report low parental involvement, particularly from low-income Latino homes (Fuller & Olson, 1988; O'Donnel, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008). This reported lack of parental involvement is often perceived as an indifference toward their child's academic success (Badillo, 2006). In many instances, this perception may frustrate educators when attempting to initiate home-school collaborative relationships, particularly when socio-emotional behaviors are of concern. Yet, a review of the literature suggests just the opposite is true. Other researchers also demonstrate that ways in which Latino parents care about their children's

academic success (Fulgini, 2007; Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001; Ryan, Casas, Kelley-Vance, Ryalls, & Nero, 2010; Valencia, 2011). Given this apparent cultural misunderstanding, examining Latino parental attitudes and expectations regarding involvement in their children's educational may serve to bring the gap closer together.

Zarate (2007) at The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI), a project based out of the University of Southern California (USC), undertook a comprehensive study to understand Latino parental involvement in the educational system. The study reviewed two factors: (a) Latino middle and high school parental definitions of involvement; and (b) educators' expectations of parental involvement/commitments in schools. The Latino families were recruited from the Los Angeles, New York, and Miami areas. The participants included first and second generation parents. The author found that the participants in the study defined parental involvement as performing the following actions:

Attend parent-teacher conferences; sign homework as required by teacher; know when to expect report cards; ask about homework daily; listen to the child read; visit classroom during open houses; ask friends, siblings, and other family members for homework help for the child; have high standards for academic performance; purchase materials required for class; drive them to tutoring and school activities; go to the library with them; be present when required to pick up report cards at school (p. 8).

Zarate concluded that "Latino parents equate involvement in their child's education *with involvement in their lives*: participation in their children's lives ensures that their formal schooling is complemented with guidance taught in their home" (p. 9). This study provided a compelling perspective that Latino parents perceive that they are involved and supportive of their children's education. In sum, Latino parental involvement can be conceived as providing the support structures for their children to become "*bien educados*" (well-educated/well-mannered/well-behaved). The concept of *bien educados* encompasses schooling, and to a higher degree, developing a good citizen with positive character traits (Valdez, 1996); the end result being a successful and honest contributing member of society. According to Valdez (1996), this type of home support can seem "invisible" to school staff yet important to the overall success of student achievement. Furthermore, Latino parents see themselves primarily supplementing and supporting the school's educational efforts in the home environment.

Educators' Expectations of Parental Involvement. Additionally, Zarate (2007) interviewed teachers, counselors, and school administrators in order to understand their expectations of Latino parents and their involvement in their children's education. There were four broad themes as defined by Zarate:

1. *School Leadership* - participation in school committees, PTA membership, student advocacy, community activism.
2. *Administrative Support* - sewing curtains for a classroom, hosting luncheons for faculty, fundraising, monitoring the gate, preparing food for the event.
3. *Parenting* - monitoring attendance, controlling kids/behavior monitoring, emotional support, authoritative parenting, offering entertainment as a reward and incentive.
4. *Academic Support* - Helping with homework, reviewing report cards, making sure student completed homework, observing class, seeking tutoring for their children, and staying on top of academic progress (p. 11).

Though there are shared perspectives regarding parental involvement, particularly with regard to *Academic Support* (i.e., seeking tutoring, homework support, reviewing academic progress and report cards, etc.), some incongruities were obvious which are helpful for school psychologists to be aware. While educators overwhelmingly expected parents to be actively and physically involved on school campus (i.e., committees, participation, fundraising, etc.), Latino parents see themselves as involved in their children's education within the home environment. This gap in expectations may give the perception that Latino parents are not involved and thus do not care about their children's education.

Home-School Collaboration

Inhibitors of the Home-School Collaborative Effort. An obvious gap between Latino parental definitions of school involvement and educators' expectations continues to persist. Bridging this gap becomes more crucial when a child has mental health problems. Particularly in these cases, this expectation of parental involvement on campus is increased. Parents of children with mental health needs are expected on the school campus in the form of collaborative meetings (i.e., Individual Education Program, Students Support Meetings, parent informational meetings, teacher meetings, etc.).

Researchers (Waterman & Harry, 2008; Zarate, 2007) have investigated inhibitors that impede on-campus Latino parental participation and can be classified according to the following themes (see Table 1):

Table 1: *Home-School Collaborative Inhibitors*

Identified Inhibitor	Description
Having access to the means and opportunity for parent-school collaboration	Lack of school-based initiative efforts that value collaboration and relationships (e.g., PTA, parent-teacher conferences, etc.)
Language and access to effective opportunities	Lack of school-based personnel that speak the parent's language. This may impact understanding, communication, and relationship building. Documents must also be available in the parents' language.
Lack of access to comprehensible information about U.S. school systems and culturally and linguistically diverse families	Migrated parents that have been educated in another country may not know the educational system of the U.S. This may impact how they understand grades, parent-teacher meetings, grade standards, Special Education, etc.
Special education and disability issues	Migrated families may have different views of disabilities that might differ from mainstream views. Views may be impacted by religion, superstition, and tradition.
Immigrant Isolation	Migrated families may experience isolation from members of their ethnicity. This isolation may create feelings of loneliness and impede home-school collaboration.
Undocumented legal status	Families that have been unable to attain legal status may be afraid to become involved physically in school systems.
Work demands	Many parents, particularly of low SES, work multiple jobs or non-traditional shifts (i.e., swing and graveyard) and may not be able to participate during school hours. Others may fear losing their jobs due to inflexibility (i.e., the need to take time off might settle well with the supervisor or boss).
School-Home Communication	School communication (i.e., automated services, flyers, infrequency, online, etc.) can be perceived as impersonal.
School Policies	Certain school policies may discourage parental participation (i.e., metal detectors, locked gates, barriers in reaching teachers).

The inhibitors listed in Table 1 can serve as a starting point for school psychologists if low levels of Latino parental involvement impact their school. Non-threatening parent surveys can be conducted to gather data as to why parents are not physically active in the school community. The California School Parent Survey (CSPS) published by WestEd, a companion tool to the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) and the California School Climate Survey (CSFS), provides a non-threatening means of gathering data from parents as to their perceptions of the overall atmosphere of learning, parental involvement, and student achievement. In addition to Spanish, the CSPS is available in 26 languages. While this type of data is very informative and helpful, it must be taken into consideration that surveys may be fraught with various challenges including technical language, answering codes, time requirements, and literacy levels. School psychologists, as school-based experts in collaborative efforts, are in a position to identify possible inhibitors that exist within their school environment in order to facilitate home-school collaboration.

Strategies for School Psychologists

Ecological Perspective and Ethnic Validity. Before discussing collaborative strategies that can be used with Latino families, undertaking an *ecological perspective* and *ethnic validity* becomes part of the decision-making process. Considering these factors becomes increasingly important when working with Latino families who have children with mental health needs. The *ecological perspective* involves examining the student within the context of a complex interactive system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Contrast to the traditional view of individual deficits, the environmental context is evaluated to determine how the environment impacts the student. Within an *ecological perspective*, the school psychologist will consider all factors that facilitate and encourage home-school collaboration and mental health intervention development. Factors to consider when working with CLD families include, but are not limited to, culture and linguistic factors within the home, childrearing practices, familial acculturation, experiences with discrimination, behavioral norms, social economic status, and educational history (Rathvon, 2008). Considering these factors will assist the school psychologist to gain a better understanding of the student's culture and family aspects.

Once all relevant ecological factors have been considered, *ethnic validity* must be used as a tool in selecting a culturally and ethnically appropriate collaborative strategy. Rathvon (2008) defines *ethnic validity* as "the degree to which interventions, goals, assistance processes, and outcomes are acceptable to intervention recipients and stakeholders with respect to their cultural/ethnic beliefs and value systems" (p. 37). The ethnic validity model as conceptualized by Barnett et al., (1995) considers three key criteria: (a) *Problem solving*, (b) *Intervention acceptance*, and (c) *Teaming*.

The first step in the *ethnic validity* model involves using the *problem-solving* model. To learn the specifics of the *problem-solving* model, the reader is directed to the article written by Deno (2005). Within the application of the *problem-solving* model, the school psychologist integrates and evaluates the impact of culture and language at each stage of the process. During this process, collaboration inhibitors may be uncovered that apply specifically to Latino parents and their ability or inability to participate in the treatment process (e.g., work demands, school policies, interpreter availability, etc.). Addressing these factors may facilitate parental participation. Secondly, *ethnic validity* calls for a determination of *intervention acceptance*. In order to increase *intervention acceptance*, school psychologists can evaluate whether the intervention or collaborative strategy that has been selected agrees with the culture, the values, and the customs of the family (Miranda, 2008). For example, as mentioned previously, when working with Latino families, the cultural value of *familismo* (family-centered) calls to include family members in the collaborative process which can in turn enhance collaboration acceptance. *Familismo* not only involves immediate family members but extended families as well (i.e., cousins, uncles, and *compadres* or "godparents"). Another aspect to consider in this step is the concept of *confianza* (trust). *Confianza* is cultural expression of faith that is developed within a trusting relationship. Stanton-Salazar (2001) conceptualizes this as a complex trusting relationship in which two mutual participants can engage in matter without the feeling being misled or manipulated.

The final step involves *teaming*, or carrying out the intervention within the confines of home-school collaboration. Miranda (2008) includes the following components that *teaming* is comprised of: “Interaction and collaboration, ethnic group representation and participation, and distributed decision making power” (p. 1746).

During interaction and collaboration, the focus should be on creating a positive atmosphere where the family feels valued and “*respeto*” or respect. *Respeto* in the Latino community refers to respecting family members within the family hierarchy (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002), such as deferring to family members for intervention selection and acceptance. The second step in this process involves including school-based personnel that are of the same ethnicity and speaks the family’s language. This step may pose challenges in schools where there are no members in the school or community that are inclusive of the family’s background. All efforts should be made to make this step possible whenever feasible. The final step in home-school collaboration will involve distributed-decision making power. This step is perhaps the most important because it communicates the message to the family that they are equal members of the team. Distributed-decision making power is expressed when educators include parents and listen to their perspectives when developing interventions. If Latino parents feel valued, respected, and included, the likelihood that they will participate and collaborate in the intervention process will increase (Ortiz, Flanagan, & Dynda, 2008).

Strategies for Increasing Latino Home-School Collaboration. To increase home-school collaboration, school-based professionals, and school psychologists in particular, need to define and outline expectations for school home-school collaboration and adapt to their school’s culture and milieu. The National Network Partnership of Schools (NNPS) provides a framework to institute, support, and improve home-school collaboration. The NNPS bases its approach on Epstein’s et al.’s (2002) framework, which establishes the following six types of collaborative expectations/outcomes which can be adapted to working with Latino parents in the following way:

- *Parenting* - Assist families in creating supportive home environments through workshops/informational meetings.
- *Communication* - Discussions about school programs and child progress.
- *Volunteering* - Enlisting parents to help at school, home, and other locations.
- *Learning at Home* - Providing the parents with ideas about how to support students in their homework or other activities.
- *Decision-Making* - Soliciting and appointing parents to serve as leaders, decision-makers, and representatives on school committees.
- *Collaborating with the Community* - Locating and using services from the community.

When working with Latino parents, the abovementioned types of parental involvement can serve as a framework for defining and guiding school-based professionals. However, ecological and ethnic validity must be considered in order to enhance participation and intervention/collaboration acceptance. Table 2 provides approaches based on Epstein’s et al. (2002) framework for parental involvement and strategies for school-based professionals. Considerations of ethnic validity and ecological variables are discussed.

Table 2: *Involvement Strategies for Latino Parents*

Type of Involvement	Strategies	Ecological Perspective	Ethnic Validity
Parenting:	Parenting strategies (social-emotional); educational, school based orientation, report card information.	CLD parenting strategies; Interpreters; bilingual/bicultural liaisons; flexible meeting times.	Provided in parent's language. Parents have input in selecting material/information (<i>Respeto</i>)
Communication:	Phone calls to invite to meetings (i.e., IEP, SST, etc); follow up with written communication; newsletters.	Parent friendly language; liaison to call and invite parents; gather alternative phone numbers.	Communication in native language. Ask parent who should be primary home contact (<i>Familismo</i>)
Volunteering:	Class parent, telephone tree, parent room, etc.	Flexible times to volunteer; bilingual school to train and support; incentives for volunteering.	Communication in native language. CLD parents to recruit other CLD parents.
Learning at Home:	Discuss state standards, homework/behavior practices; behavioral/social expectations.	Respect family time; empower families with limited education.	Involve family members (<i>Familismo</i>). Appreciate home support in native language.
Decision Making:	Parent leaders, parent empowerment, home-school committees (PTA/advisory, etc.).	Flexible meeting times. Shared decision making. Leadership awareness classes.	Communication in native language. CLD parents to recruit other CLD parents (<i>Confianza</i>).
Collaborating with the Community:	Information on community health, counseling, job training, support services, etc.	Low cost resources; evening services.	Native language services. Family-centered (<i>Familismo</i>).

When selecting and implementing any strategy, it is important to note that the strategy selection must be inclusive and respectful of the family's origin, culture, religion, and native language. School-based practitioners are encouraged to consult with community-based leaders, religious organizations, and university-based faculty with expertise in the Latino culture before instituting any strategy or intervention (Martines, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

With the increase of Latino demographics in public schools systems across the United States it is imperative that school psychologists develop skills and strategies to enhance collaborative efforts between the school and home environments. The need for home-school partnerships becomes especially important when mental health issues are of concern and the need to work together becomes foundational to successful outcomes. School psychologists as collaboration and mental health experts can serve as consultants for selecting strategies that demonstrate value and acceptance for Latino families in the school system.

This article discussed the existing literature on Latinos' perspective of their involvement in their children's education as well as educators' expectations of physical involvement in the school setting. There is an obvious discrepancy between the two that lends for misunderstandings. In order to facilitate student success, schools and parents must work together effectively and efficiently. School psychologists are encouraged to identify inhibitors of their Latino parents and what might be contributing to their ability or inability to become physically involved in their children's education. Through this investigation, it is hoped that the gap might decrease between Latino parents' involvement and educators' expectations. School psychologists may also identify inhibitors or barriers that prevent Latino parents from participating physically on the school campus. Additionally, implementing the strategies discussed herein may prove helpful in bridging the gap between schools and Latino families.

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