Early Childhood Educ J (2016) 44:445–452
DOI 10.1007/s10643-015-0728-z

Perceptions About Parental Engagement Among Hispanic Immigrant Mothers of First Graders from Low-Income Backgrounds

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Published online: 28 August 2015

Abstract Parental engagement is critical to children's educational achievement. Before and during elementary school, it is crucial for parents to be involved in their children's education in order to foster development and achievement. Hispanic parents' immigrant status, coupled with a lack of English proficiency, means that they often find themselves of low socioeconomic status (SES). Being low SES also means that parents possess fewer resources for engaging with their children. The current study seeks to understand low-income, primarily Hispanic mothers' perceptions of their roles in their first grade children's education. Mothers were interviewed regarding parenting confidence related to teaching their children, and responses were analyzed using qualitative research methods. Mothers in this study associated their roles in their children's education with two primary areas: helping their children to learn, and raising their children to be well-behaved and respectful. The main barrier to parental confidence in these roles appeared to be mothers' lack of English proficiency. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that Hispanic parents maintain the perception of a lack of proficiency in English as a significant barrier to parental involvement in their children's education in the United States. Future interventions with teachers and parents may benefit from these findings in consideration of the optimal ways to involve parent related to their perceived personal strengths regarding parental engagement.

Keywords Parenting confidence · Parental engagement · Low-income

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Introduction

Parental engagement, here defined as the behaviors related to learning and education in which parents engage with their children, is critical to children's formal educational achievement (Epstein 1995; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). These behaviors may include practical support for the school in general, such as in the form of participation in co-curricular programs like Head Start (Castro, Bryant et al. 2004; Wen et al. 2012) or attending school-wide events (Lee and Bowen 2006). Other parental involvement behaviors constitute specific types of academic support, including support directed towards helping children continue formal learning and completion of homework in the home (Sheldon and Epstein 2005; Wen et al. 2012) as well as management of children's time and enforcement of rules related to homework (Lee and Bowen 2006). Another, indirect role parents believe they assume in their children's education is that of someone who conveys expectations and standards for educational attainment and achievement (Froiland et al. 2012).

Before children enter elementary school, parental engagement in activities is important for fostering children's development, particularly in the area of literacy (Christensen et al. 1992; Leslie and Allen 1999). For example, regarding the area of literacy, Sénéchal and LeFevre found a link between parents' teaching their children about reading in kindergarten and children's own

emergent literacy skills in first grade (2002). Once children have entered school, it is beneficial for parents to continue this involvement in activities. Proactive parental support during the elementary school years, including helping with homework and engaging with teachers has been shown repeatedly to be related to reading achievement (Sénéchal and LeFevre 2002; Shaver and Walls 1998), math achievement (Sheldon and Epstein 2005), children's feelings of self-efficacy in school, and even decreased likelihood of high school dropout (Barnard 2004). Parental engagement also has been associated with children's self-regulation, starting in early elementary school (Gorman-Smith et al. 2007). Additionally, Xu, Kushner Benson, Mudrey-Camino, and Steiner found that some aspects of parental involvement (school involvement, conveying expectations about children's achievement) positively influenced fifth graders' self-regulated learning skills, including self-motivation and self-control (2010). Indirect support in the form of voicing expectations has also been associated with academic achievement (Lee and Bowen 2006).

It has been established that children raised in households with low-income are placed at increased risk for poor school performance (Parker et al. 1988; U.S. Department of Education 2011), and one significant way in which this occurs is via a lack of parental engagement (Aber et al. 2000; Bronfenbrenner 1977). This may be especially true for Hispanic immigrants, whose lack of English proficiency often is linked to low-income socioeconomic status (SES) (Hill and Torres 2010). Being of a lower socioeconomic status also means that parents possess fewer material resources and possible, emotional resources, for engaging with their children (Aber et al. 2000; Gershoff et al. 2007). This may extend to engagement with their children's education as well (Orozco 2008).

While there is evidence that parents are eager to be involved in their children's education, research to date has not studied which aspects parents view as their responsibilities in supporting their children's education. This information is especially useful related to the study of families who are at greatest risk; for example, low income families and parents with limited English proficiency (LEP), both of which are often problems for immigrant families. Hispanic parents' perceptions of their roles in their children's education is an important area of study, given low school readiness (Garcia and Miller 2008) and low preschool program participation (Magnuson et al. 2006) among Hispanic children. Hispanic immigrant families in particular demonstrate high educational aspirations for their children (Goldenberg et al. 2001; Ryan et al. 2010). These aspirations have been shown to be related to the sacrifices these parents have made to ensure their children's schooling and future success, related to immigration to the United States and various types of employment as ways of improving the lives of their children (Ceballo et al. 2014; Hill and Torres 2010). Previous research has demonstrated that Hispanic parents' conceptualizations of their children's school education may not be limited to activities related to academic achievement (Ceballo et al. 2014; Zarate 2007), but rather may include learning conforming behavior and proper manners (Hill and Torres 2010; Okagaki and Frensch 1998).

In order to promote engagement during the school age period, it is necessary to understand how parents perceive their own roles in their children's education. This information may aid in curriculum design as well as in the design of interventions to increase parental engagement. Previous work in this area has been limited to the study of parents of older children (e.g., Ceballo 2004; Ceballo et al. 2014), or non-immigrant parents (e.g., Sénéchal and LeFevre 2003). The current study seeks to add to previous work about understanding parents' perceptions of their roles in their children's education among mothers of first graders, and to do so by eliciting information about mothers' perceptions in their own words, analyzed using qualitative methods.

Therefore, the current study has two aims:

1. To understand behaviors parents engage in with their children that they view as important for their children's learning and education [and viewed as their responsibility].
2. To understand both their confidence in and perceived barriers to engaging in these behaviors.

Within the context of a larger project examining school readiness and parent involvement, the current study looks at the ways that primarily Hispanic and immigrant mothers with low-income conceptualized their role in their children's education. Utilizing qualitative methods detailed below, this study sought to understand mothers' confidence in this role and the responsibilities they believed it entailed.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Recruitment

This was a qualitative analysis of mother-infant dyads enrolled in a larger study of parenting, child development and school readiness. Procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of and approved in writing by New York University School of Medicine's Institutional Review Board, the Bellevue Research Committee, and Bellevue HHC. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual parents included in the study.

Study Sample

The current study sample was enrolled as part of a larger, ongoing randomized controlled trial (RCT) to study parenting interventions in pediatric primary care, the Bellevue Project for Early Language, Literacy, and Education Success (BELLE) (Mendelsohn et al. 2011b) performed in the postpartum unit of an urban public hospital (BHC) serving low income, primarily immigrant, families. The RCT included two interventions (Video Interaction Project [VIP], Building Blocks [BB]) and a control group. VIP is a relationship-based intervention, using video-recordings of mother–child dyads to reinforce interactional strengths. BB communicates with parents via parenting newsletters, learning materials and questionnaires.

Consecutive mother–newborn dyads planning to receive pediatric primary care at an urban public hospital and who met eligibility criteria were enrolled in the current study. These criteria, which have been described previously (Mendelsohn et al. 2011a, b) were: child full-term newborn with no significant medical/perinatal complications, and mother primary caregiver with primary language English or Spanish, ability to maintain contact with the program, and no prior participation in the interventions under study.

The current sample consisted of 92 mothers with a child enrolled in first grade; participants were consecutively interviewed as their children reached first grade age between July 2012 and January 2014. The majority of mothers were Hispanic (92.4 %), monolingual Spanish-speakers (88.0 %), immigrant (91.3 %), married or living with a partner (80.4 %), and employed (51.8 %). The majority of mothers had not completed high school (64.1 %) and reported a mean of 9.8 years of education (SD 3.5). The sample was almost evenly split in terms of child's sex (52.2 % boys, 47.8 % girls), with the majority of children second or later-born (66.3 %). The majority of mothers were immigrants (91.3 %) who came to the U.S. between the years 1999 and 2006 primarily from Mexico (68.5 %) (years ranged from 1982 to 2006), Ecuador (10.9 %), and the Dominican Republic (3.3 %).

Procedure

Research Questions

As part of a larger interview about their 1st graders' development and experiences, mothers were asked a series of two open-ended questions. Qualitative research methods were utilized (Strauss and Corbin 1994). Mothers were initially asked: *Tell me more about your role as a parent? How confident do you feel?* The word "more" was included in the question because mothers had previously answered other questions about parenting during the interview. Probes were asked when mothers provided short responses, such as, "I feel confident." These probes included *Tell me a little bit more* and *Why did you feel that way?* If perceptions related to school were not addressed, the following probes were utilized: *How confident do you feel related to teaching your child?* Probes for this question included, *And in terms of academic education, how confident do you feel?* or *And in that which has to do with school. How confident do you feel?*

Mothers' answers were transcribed, exactly as spoken aloud, by trained research assistants, who were fluent in English and Spanish. Answers provided in Spanish were translated into English.

Analysis

Qualitative methods were employed to analyze mothers' responses to two related open-ended questions regarding parenting confidence. Specifically, the authors applied grounded theory methods of open coding and axial coding (LaRossa 2005). Utilizing the method of open coding of conversational analysis (Brantlinger et al. 2005), the authors reviewed the interview transcripts and highlighted repeated, substantive terms as a way of identifying key variables. Next, utilizing axial coding, the authors compared and identified key terms that clustered around larger themes, finally extracting and labeling these themes.

Investigator triangulation was utilized to support the validity of this research (Brantlinger et al. 2005). Specifically, responses to the two questions were analyzed together as the second question primarily served as a probe for the first question.

Two of the authors served as qualitative coders (SBJ, JA), with the first author serving as master coder. Agreement was more than 90 % for all coded themes (detailed percentages for each theme are provided below). Disagreements were resolved based on transcript review and discussion so that final agreement across coded themes was 100 %.

Results

Based on the analytical methods described above, several themes were extracted from the data. These themes and supporting remarks from mothers are outlined below in order of frequency.

Theme 1: Mothers Helping Their Children Learn

The most common response from mothers included some aspect of helping their children learn, with 49 mothers making some mention of learning, homework, books, or reading (53.5 % of the sample). Two subthemes involved

helping with homework, mentioned by 28 mothers (30.4 %) and utilizing reading and books, mentioned by nine mothers (9.8 %). There were disagreements about five additional responses, which ultimately were excluded after discussion among the two coders.

Subtheme: Helping with Homework

A subtheme emerged with mothers mentioning helping with their children's homework. Mothers who brought up their children's homework emphasized their roles in scaffolding their children to do this work, including feelings of confidence: "If he doesn't understand something that the teacher explained I try to explain it to him."; "I feel good preparing them and helping them with their homework."; "When they told me at school that there were problems, we put ourselves to work very hard and we progressed a lot."; "Well, I consider that well, that he has to do his homework. I explain to him what he has to do, and I help him in what he doesn't know."; "We do his homework together and I am always attentive to what he needs in school."; "When he would bring me the homework that he couldn't do, I would tell him, 'Ok let's see,' and I would help him. So now, the last month, he was student of the month…"

Mothers also emphasized the importance of helping their children with homework in the context of feelings of worry and inadequacy: "That is what worries us, moms, we have to teach them the homework."; "When we do the homework, I get frustrated and upset.";. "Sometimes I feel that I could do more, because he loses his patience too quickly—like with his homework. I try to help him, but if I don't understand we both get frustrated. I would like to be able to help him more." More specifically, some mothers noted that they did not feel confident when helping with homework: "It's like I don't feel confident, because sometimes I can't help her with the homework they send her, and I have to ask for help. And that makes me feel badly." In the context of their helping roles, some mothers also referred to emphasizing the importance of homework in the context of success in general: "I want her to have a career, so I tell her to do her homework. If she can't, I help her."; "I think that I can help them with their schoolwork. I am a mother that can help them with their homework, and that I can push them to study more, to form a career, and to have something in life."

Subtheme: Reading and Books

A subtheme emerged regarding the use of reading and books to help children learn. Some mothers who specifically mentioned books discussed them in the context of excelling in school: "We read because of school he reads at school…"; "I tell her to practice math and reading and that she should learn it today because tomorrow it will be more difficult." In describing engaging their children in reading for school success, mothers expressed pride: "I feel really good because he achieved a much better level of reading that was low at first, but is now over the level. I help him read, I show him how to read me labels and directions, sign, what they meant. He is now past the level they wanted him to reach." "I believe I have given him a lot of support, and I do help him to read, to spell words…" Other mothers expressed the importance of books themselves laying the foundation for success in general: "We are achieving goals in reading…I always give him a piece of advice: that his best friends are the books."; "I believe I am doing well, [I am] working at night, I would prefer to be home at night to read to her more often and get her to watch less TV. But I take books to work and read to her over the phone."; "I try to invest in things that will help him, and that will serve him. If we go out, and he wants a book, I buy it for him."

Theme 2: Teaching Children Appropriate Behavior/ Manners

The second most prominent theme among mothers' responses concerning their perceptions about their confidence as parents was related to teaching their children appropriate behavior in the form of proper manners and adherence to rules. This was the case even when mothers were probed with the follow-up question asking about their confidence in teaching their children. 31 mothers (33.7 %) in the sample referred to their children's behavior in response to questions about parenting confidence. The two coders independently coded 28 of these mothers as considering their children's behavior when thinking about their parenting confidence. Disagreements about three of the responses were resolved upon transcript review and those responses were also included.

A sampling of mothers' responses about behavior clustered around teaching their children to adhere to rules: "I have rules and I expect them to be obeyed."; "Well, I think that I am educating her well, things that can be done and things that should not be done…to be respectful, especially with adults. I think I am giving her a good education"; "I feel that I am educating her well. I teach her manners. To ask for permission."; "…he must listen to his teacher, I tell him to behave well, not to create conflict…"; "Every day I ask them how their day was at school and, if anyone bothers them, they have to tell me. Likewise, they also should not be intimidating other children; they should not be making fun of other children. And they have to respect older people and everyone. I always tell them that at home they have to behave well, because that is how they should behave everywhere"; "I think I am a good mom to educate them, I give them good advice, what is right and wrong,

how they ought to behave"; "I tell him, 'You have to give thanks, you have to wait, you have to be thankful.' All that kind of education. One wants them to be well-educated, behaved"; "Well in education I feel that I have taught him to be respectful—at the table, with the whole family, in school, with everyone…In terms of school, he has to take care of his things—books, and pencil—and not take things that don't belong to him."; "I like for him to behave well when he goes out. That he always has a good behavior. I don't like to teach him to be selfish, nor violent." Another group of responses pointed toward providing punishment when behavior was inappropriate: "I try to talk to him when he behaves badly in school. I tell him to respect his teacher and the rules of the school. Also, I tell him to behave well with other children."; "I have confidence that they will obey me, because if they don't I will punish them. If they do not obey me I will reprimand them. I have confidence because I tell them something and they pay attention to me…Every day I tell them to behave well."; "I have confidence, a lot of confidence. The things that I do for my children are good, I set rules for them. What they must use, what is good for them and what isn't, I give them advice, I make them reflect on the positives and negatives about the things they do and [teach them] that all things have consequences."; "I feel like I am doing well in the way that I educate them. I have trust in my punishments, because they obey me, they know that they were not doing things well and that will serve them well in the future."

Theme 3: Lack of English Language as a Barrier

A third theme emerged from data collected from monolingual Spanish-speaking mothers: 17 out of 78 Spanish-speakers (21.8 %) expressed concerns that an inability to speak English created a barrier to interactions with their children and diminished their parenting confidence. A subtheme was found related to seeking help with English from others in the community. There were no disagreements; therefore, there was no need for further consultation among coders.

Some mothers expressed distress that they could not help their children with their homework: "I can't help him a lot, because I don't know English…"; "With school things I feel a little insecure because I don't speak the language."; "Sometimes I don't feel good. I would like to help her more, especially with things in English."; "…because I feel bad because I can't…because, since the homework is in English, I can't read it and I don't understand it. I can't help her very much."; "I tell them to pay attention in school because I don't speak English."; "With homework, to read, when I ask her what the book was about and if she doesn't understand it we have to repeat it. But, since I don't speak English, sometimes I don't understand a word and get lost in the sentence; and when I get lost she gets lost as well."

Subtheme: Seeking Language Help from Others in the Community

A subtheme that emerged among mothers' responses about lack of English as a barrier to feeling confident about their parenting was that some mothers sought help from others in the community when English was needed, especially from other family members such as other, older siblings or cousins. Six mothers referred to this theme. Examples of mothers' comments included the following: "Whatever is in English, her brother helps her."; "But, since I don't speak English, sometimes I don't understand a word and get lost in the sentence, and when I get lost she gets lost as well. So we have to ask her big sister what things mean."; "…because I don't know the language her homework is in. Even she knows that I can't, and she asks her cousin for help."

Detailed information regarding themes and subthemes is available in Table 1.

Discussion

Although there is a link between parental engagement and children's formal educational achievement, there has been limited study of parents' own perceptions of their roles in their children's education among mothers who are low-income and who are Hispanic immigrants; there has been even more limited study among parents of young children, such as those just beginning elementary school, a group whom it is critically important to study if behaviors are to be influenced early. The current study sought to explore information about this population's perceptions of and attitudes about these roles utilizing a qualitative approach.

Mothers in this study associated their roles in their children's education with two primary areas: helping their children to learn, whether in the context of formal schooling or about the world in general, and raising their children to be well-behaved and respectful. When discussing their behaviors in these areas, mothers generally expressed confidence and expressed feelings of exerting an influence. These findings have implications for the ways in which schools and teachers involve parents in their children's education. They also shed some light on some of the educational priorities of Hispanic parents with low-income of children about to enter elementary school, highlighting the common belief that education should incorporate more than formal schooling in literacy and mathematics but also behavioral and moral guidance. These findings add to those of previous studies, which have found that Hispanic

Table 1 Number and percent of responses per theme and subtheme (n = 92)

Theme 1	Number (%)
Helping children learn	49 (62.8 %)
Subthemes	
Helping children learn: Helping with homework	28 (35.9 %)
Helping children learn: Reading and books	9 (11.5 %)
Theme 2	
Teaching children appropriate behavior/manners	31 (33.7 %)
Theme 3	
Lack of English as a barrier	17 (21.8 %)
Subtheme	
Seeking help from others in the community[a]	6 (7.7 %)
Concern about children's behavior	31 (39.7 %)

[a] n = 78 monolingual Spanish-speaking mothers

immigrant parents place an emphasis on their children's school achievement, even in the face of feeling as though they cannot be that helpful due to a lack of proficiency in English (Vera et al. 2012). The current study enhances those findings by presenting mothers' own words about their perceptions of the roles they play in influencing and helping with their children's education. Mothers' comments about their children's behavior are consistent with previous work documenting that Hispanic parents' ideas about education encompass more than formal academic achievements such as literacy and mathematics, including morality and respect for society's rules and one's elders (Olmedo 2003). Previous research has also shown a positive association between Hispanic children's educational efforts to meet their parents' expectations and children's feelings of respeto ("respect") towards their parents (Ceballo et al. 2014).

In addition to mothers' answers including their responsibilities related to supporting their children's education, some mothers also brought up barriers to involvement. The main barrier to parental confidence in these roles appeared to be mothers' lack of English proficiency. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating a significant barrier perceived by Hispanic parents to involvement in their children's education in the United States is that many parents lack proficiency in English (Hill and Torres 2010; Keith and Lichtman 1994), which makes conversations about school activities and help with homework a challenge. Despite the language barrier, parents have reported a willingness to be involved in their children's education. For example, Lopez et al. (2000), in their study of Mexican parents, found parents were eager to become involved in their children's elementary school despite lacking English proficiency. In fact, Keith and Lichtman also studied a group of Mexican parents with lower English proficiency, and found that they had higher educational aspirations for their eighth graders than their counterparts who spoke better English (1994), which is in contrast with what might be expected from parents with difficulty communicating and establishing involvement in with their children's education. Despite conveying their challenges with speaking English, similar to Keith and Lichtman's study, mothers in the current study were generally eager to help their children and to become involved in school and daily activities. This study has some important limitations. One limitation which is inherent in qualitative research is that the authors of this study may have been subjectively influenced in their conversational analysis coding. A second limitation is that data were collected only from mothers; future studies should ensure the inclusion of the points of view of fathers, grandparents, and other primary caregivers. It is noteworthy that although lack of English proficiency was the only commonly mentioned challenge for mothers, a relatively small number of mothers mentioned this as a barrier [17 out of 78 monolingual Spanish-speaking mothers (21.8 %)]; future studies of this topic within this population should further probe this question. A final limitation is related to mothers' participation in a larger ongoing study of child development and school readiness since the time of their children's births, including participation in developmental assessments and possible exposure to interventions: It is possible that participation in this study may have influenced mothers' answers to the open-ended questions presented and may have primed them to be more willing to discuss their children's education and their role in it.

Using their own words to answer open-ended questions about their children's education, mothers in the current study made frequent mention of activities, issues, and barriers related to formal schooling. Future work in this area should address this population's experiences with educational activities which occur outside of school. In their 2001 study, Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Hamby, Raab, and McLean demonstrated that parents' routines and real world activities with their children can provide many and diverse opportunities for educational development. Experiences outside of a formal school setting provide diverse learning environments as well as contexts for applying what has been learned. Learning during everyday activities may provide additional appeal and engagement for both parents and children, increasing the frequency of these learning opportunities (Dunst et al. 2001; Dunst et al. 2010). For example, a trip to a zoo or a farm imparts indelible lessons about animals' appearances and sounds but also as fellow living creatures; swimming together provides information about how to swim, which involves listening and movement abilities. Interventions with parents might incorporate reinforcement of this kind of

learning, not only to enhance children's experiences but also to improve parents' feelings of self-efficacy (Dunst et al. 2010). Additionally, families with fewer resources, such as those in the current study, might be encouraged to use more "unstructured" activities as moments for learning (Dunst et al. 2010). Examples might include discussions about people and weather encountered on a daily commute, singing a song together during bathtime, or regular trips to the grocery store with opportunities for labeling colors, letters, and words, a conversation which can be continued at home making dinner together while a child plays with pretend food or pots and pans. Dunst et al. (2010) also highlighted that this type of everyday learning outside of the formal classroom affords cultural learning opportunities, which might be a way in which mothers in the current study could alleviate some of their concerns about the English-language barriers to teaching their children.

Future research should also investigate teachers' willingness to understand parents' role perceptions and feelings of limitations. Future research should also expand to other caregivers, such as fathers and grandparents, to understand their perceptions about their roles in their children's education. Future related work might aim to address the concerns of parents with lower English proficiency, via educational interventions for teachers so that parents may find ways to be involved in their children's education without needing English proficiency. Additionally, teachers would benefit from cultural education about the families of the children with whom they are working in order to understand parents' conceptualizations of their children's education and the roles that they wish to play.

In conclusion, this exploratory study offers insights into the ways in which Hispanic and immigrant mothers from low-income backgrounds view their roles in their young children's education. Although mothers sometimes cited lack of English as a barrier, mothers were generally enthusiastic about playing significant roles in their children's education. Their broad views about all that education may encompass underscore the need for more diverse opportunities for parent involvement in school and at home, both in formal activities as well as in informal, less structured everyday experiences.

Acknowledgments This study was supported by grant R01 HD047740-01-07 from the National Institutes of Health/National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and by the Tiger Foundation, the Marks Family Foundation, the Rhodebeck Charitable Trust, Children of Bellevue, Inc., and KiDS of NYU. There are no conflicts of interest to disclose. We are grateful to many individuals who contributed to this project, including Jennifer Ledesma, Caroline Raak, Jessica Urgelles, Triana Urraca, Kristina Vlahovicova, Lisa White, Margaret Wolff, and Brenda Woodford.

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