



Through Their Cultural Lens: A Qualitative Approach to Understanding Mexican Immigrant Families' Experiences with the Transition to School

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Abstract

The transition to kindergarten is a critical developmental marker for young children. While the early childhood literature includes several established best practices to ensure a smooth and positive transition for both children and their families, less is known about transitional experiences of Mexican immigrants. Using a qualitative approach, this study investigated the transition to kindergarten from the perspective of Mexican immigrant families. Notable themes were identified around parents' experiences with and beliefs about school transitions. Kindness, respectful communication, beliefs about involvement and how to approach the transition, and the power of relationships in acquiring knowledge were each central components to optimal school transitions. Our findings provide another important step toward understanding factors that facilitate a meaningful transition to formal schooling for young children and families—especially among a group typically underrepresented in research. Early childhood educators, researchers, and policy makers can inform this process by further giving voice to parents and children as they prepare for kindergarten.

Keywords Transition to kindergarten · Mexican immigrants · Parents' experiences · Readiness

Introduction

The transition to kindergarten is viewed as an important milestone in children's lives and can set the tone for children's academic experiences. During this time, children and their families encounter new relationships, roles, cultures, opportunities, and responsibilities (Malsch et al., 2011). A notable limitation in the research examining the transition to kindergarten is the absence of information on how Latinx families and their children experience the transition to the United States (U.S.) school system. Latinx families and communities comprise a large and diverse group that include, but are not limited to, Mexican immigrants.

Mexican immigrants are defined as individuals who were born in Mexico and later migrated to the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020) and make up the largest immigrant group in the U.S. Although Mexican immigrant children comprise a considerable share of the early childhood landscape, little is known about their transition to kindergarten (Garcia & Gonzalez, 2006). The literature on kindergarten transitions repeatedly points out the barriers for families generally, yet less is known regarding the experiences (negative or positive) of Mexican immigrant parents. The present study utilizes a strengths-based perspective suggesting that Mexican immigrant parents and their children might have positive transition experiences based on their unique cultural lens. Although not consistently and explicitly defined in the literature, the present study defines the concept of *transition to kindergarten* to include an extended time period prior to children's kindergarten entry, or first day of kindergarten, and the period of adjustment that follows. Therefore, for purposes of this study, the transition to kindergarten is thought of as spring and summer of the academic year prior to kindergarten entry as well as the first few months of kindergarten. The following literature review summarizes two relevant areas—transition best practices and challenges to

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the transition to kindergarten seen through the cultural lens of Mexican immigrant families.

Transition Best Practices and Mexican Immigrant Families

Several studies have explored ‘best practices’ for children and families as they navigate the transition to kindergarten. La Paro et al. (2003) indicated that a critical component of transition activities is a family-school connection (e.g., orientations/registrations, meetings, special events). Family-school connections acknowledge that the family unit plays a crucial and irreplaceable role in the transition to school. Acknowledgement of the family unit is linked to the concept of *familismo*, which is deeply woven into the beliefs of Latinx families (Cycyk & Hammer, 2020; Durand & Perez, 2013; Reese et al., 1995). *Familismo* upholds the value of the family unit while emphasizing closeness, harmony and support. Connecting with the family unit may be critical in transition best practices and these connections may be especially important for underrepresented or overlooked groups (Crosnoe, 2006). For Mexican immigrant parents especially, “the school is the first extrafamilial context of childhood” (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2009, p. 261) to which they are exposed and including practices grounded in *familismo* may serve as a buffer against the negative effects of stressors. Thus, the issue of whether or not Mexican immigrant families perceive and experience a connection to the school is crucial to their future involvement and their children’s academic success.

Other literature on transition practices suggests additional key dimensions to help families and their children make a smooth transition to school. For example, a study by Malsch et al. (2011) showed that transition activities in general tend to focus on the three key dimensions of (1) providing information, (2) emotional support and encouragement, and (3) active empowerment of parents to act as advocates for their children. Research has also suggested that the earlier families visit the school and speak with their child’s teacher, the more welcome families will feel, thus impacting their transition experience and potentially their further school involvement (Kreider, 2002). Cycyk and colleagues (2020) build on these findings, suggesting that perceptions of being invited to connect with the school are linked to reinforced home-based parental involvement and positive markers of school readiness (e.g., academic achievement and prosocial behavior). These findings held true among a sample of Latinx parents who emphasized the importance of positive perceptions of teachers’ invitations for engagement (Walker et al., 2011). Supportive relationships with school personnel are also among the top reasons for feeling welcome among Latinx (Durand & Perez, 2013). Transition best practices suggest the importance of the family-school connection, as well as other key dimensions, but little is

known about whether or not these best practices are aligned with what Mexican immigrant families need and with what they experience. The level of intensity in which transitions to kindergarten occur are also important considerations for best practices. Programs adopting low-intensity transition practices are designed to fit the needs of larger groups. High-intensity transition practices, however, address the individualized needs of children and families. The latter approach is best suited for families with unique needs, including immigrant, linguistically diverse, and families with disabilities (Daley et al., 2011).

Challenges to Successful Transitions to Kindergarten

Research has identified many potential barriers to family involvement during the transition to kindergarten (Hernandez et al., 2007; Koury & Votruba-Drzal, 2014; La Paro et al., 2003; McIntyre et al., 2007). Barriers, unique to all families, include parents’ work schedules, language differences, transportation issues, lack of child care, limited motivation/interest, other factors associated with poverty, as well as a history of negative experiences in the school setting (Malsch et al., 2011). Factors that are unique to immigrant families regarding the transition to kindergarten have also been framed in a deficit-perspective. Hernandez et al. (2007) identify several general challenges confronting immigrant parents (including fathers) and families such as: parents’ low-wages (i.e., earning less than twice the minimum wage); parents’ low educational levels; parents’ limited English proficiency; linguistically isolated households; family poverty; housing-cost burden; and overcrowded housing. Limited English proficiency, in particular, often appears in the literature as a significant obstacle to seamless school transitions (Peterson et al., 2018).

Barriers to family-school connections can make the transition to school a difficult process, but when coupled with cultural beliefs that may be different than those commonly found in the U.S. public school system, it is unclear if these challenges are still present or if culture may actually serve as a buffer to these challenges. Rodriguez and Olswang (2003) suggested that parents from other cultures might differ in their beliefs and values because they are immersed and interacting in the center of multiple systems or contexts. These contexts include the home cultural environment in the present as well as the historical and sociocultural context of their home culture. In addition, families that migrate to and interact with U.S. culture may or may not influence a change in their own cultural beliefs and values.

Culture inexplicably plays a role in families’ beliefs and experiences regarding the transition to school (Keels & Raver, 2009). The lens through which parents experience the transition to school may be greatly influenced by their own experiences from their home country. Mexican immigrant

parents, for example, may have experiences that are unique to their own culture including past schooling experiences and their experience of emigrating to a new country (Plata-Potter & De Guzman, 2012). Prior literature describing the role of culture on transition practices has focused on challenges, rather than the use of a strength-based approach to highlight and build upon what schools are doing well.

The current study focuses on a strengths-based approach to advance the voices of Mexican immigrant parents. While research on Mexican immigrant families' perspectives, beliefs, and experiences on the transition to kindergarten is emerging, there is still knowledge to be gained about their transition to kindergarten. Mexican immigrants and their children are a sizable subset of the Latinx population whose transition to kindergarten experiences have not been identified in the literature. Therefore, it is important to expand our knowledge on this critical topic. The present study addresses the gaps in the literature by addressing the following aims:

- (a) Explore the experiences of Mexican immigrant parents during their children's transition to kindergarten.
- (b) Describe Mexican immigrant parents' beliefs regarding their children's transition to kindergarten.

Methods

Qualitative data were collected through in-person individual interviews. The following section describes the methods used to collect and analyze the data. The lead researcher, who is a non-native fully bilingual Spanish speaker who self-identifies as Latina was responsible for the data collection and analyses. In addition to the linguistic and cultural assets the lead researcher brought to the study, she also has over a decade of working with Latinx children and their families in early childhood programs, and advanced training in qualitative research methodologies. Procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' home institution and followed ethical standards. Informed consent was explained and obtained in both Spanish and English, as the consent forms were provided in both languages to all participants.

Participants

Recruitment

Four elementary schools located in a rural county in a southeastern state served as recruitment sites. At the time of data collection, the county's estimated population was 140,000, with 80% of the population identifying as White, 10% as Hispanic, 6% as Black, and 1% each for Asian, American Indian/Native American, and Mixed Race (County

Data retrieved from <http://www.city-data.com>). The schools targeted for the study had the highest Latinx populations in the school district. Each school is described below.

School A serves a small town and rural area and is an average size school in the southeastern state, with a student population of approximately 494 (Retrieved from <https://www.randolph.k12.nc.us/>). Of the 78 Kindergarten students enrolled, 59% were White, 26% Hispanic, 8% Black, and 6% mixed race. School B is a smaller than average school serving 430 students from a small town and surrounding rural area (Retrieved from <https://www.randolph.k12.nc.us/>). Of the 78 Kindergarten students enrolled, 42% identified as White, 36% as Hispanic, 15% as Black, and 6% as mixed race. School C is a large school in a small city. At 818 students, School C's population is larger than the state average for elementary schools (Retrieved from <https://www.randolph.k12.nc.us/>). Of the 145 Kindergarten students, 62% identified as White, 32% as Hispanic, 2.5% as Black, 2.5% as mixed race, and 1% as Asian. School D is located in a relatively large city (for the county) and serves a population of 579 students (Retrieved from <https://www.randolph.k12.nc.us/>). Of the 99 Kindergarten students, 62% identified as White, 36% as Hispanic, 0% as Black, and 2% as mixed race.

Mexican parents who self-identified as first generation (i.e., having been born in Mexico and immigrated to the U.S.) whose children had completed kindergarten the previous academic year were invited to participate in the study. The ESL Program Liaison and parent educators working at target schools identified potential participants based on their knowledge of the families in the school. School staff contacted eligible families via telephone to describe the study and invited them to participate. Parents who were interested in being interviewed agreed for their contact information to be given to the lead researcher so they could contact them and tell them more about the study. Eight parents who expressed interest in participating were contacted by the bilingual lead researcher via phone. One was not able to be reached. Therefore, written consent was obtained from seven participants. The sample was spread across the four participating schools, with two interview participants at each of three schools and one participant at one school.

Study Sample

Seven parents who met the eligibility criteria (self-identified as first generation Mexican and had children who had completed kindergarten the previous academic year) participated in the study. Parent participants were all mothers and their ages ranged from 27 to 43-years-old. Three of the parents interviewed had two children, two had three children, one had four children, and one parent had one child. All but one parent was married. The number of years parents reported living in the United States ranged from 10 to 22 years. All of

Table 1 Sample characteristics

Parent name ^a and child's school	Age	Year arrived in US	Where from in Mexico	Educational history	Number of kids (gender/grade)
Cynthia—School C	27	1991	Michoacán	Started K in the U.S	2 (female/K, male/6th)
Claudia—School C	27	1995	Mexico City	Attended in Mexico until 4th grade, then continued in the U.S	2 (female/K, female/2nd)
Lia—School B		2003	Tabasco	Attended in Mexico until 2nd grade (then worked on the ranch)	4 (female/K, gender not reported for other 3/post high school)
Magdalena—School A	43	2003	Pachuca	Attended in Mexico for 9 years (secundaria) and 3 years (academica)	1 (male/K)
Maria—School D	34	1999	Oaxaca	Attended in Mexico until 12th grade	3 (male/K, male/ K, male/7th)
Olivia—School A	29	1996	Toluca	Attended in Mexico through 7 grade and then attended 1 year in U.S,	3 (female/K, male/1st, female/6th)
Paula—School B	40	2000	Aguascalientes	Attended in Mexico and finished preparatoria (h.s.)	2 (female/K, female/3-y-o)

^aPseudonyms used to protect the confidentiality of participants

the parents interviewed spoke Spanish as their first language. The majority of the parents being interviewed spoke Spanish entirely, while two spoke both Spanish and English. Characteristics of parents in this study can be found in Table 1.

Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview protocol was created specifically to encompass perspectives about the transition to kindergarten experiences of not just children, but also parents. Relatedly, the unique lens of which Mexican immigrant parents experience and perceive the transition might differ from others because they are immersed and interacting in the center of multiple systems or cultural contexts (Rodriguez & Olswang, 2003). Therefore, questions were developed related to culture, race, and immigration to fully focus on the unique cultural lens through which Mexican immigrant parents experience the transition to kindergarten. Following the approach described by Creswell (2007), who suggested that “questions are a narrowing of the central research question and subquestions of the research study” (p. 133), the lead researcher first created a short introduction about the study’s purpose. Broader questions were asked first to invite parents to open up and talk more generally about their experiences with their children’s transition to kindergarten (Creswell, 2007). Broader questions included “Tell me about your child.”, “What does your child like to do?”, etc. Next, in order to transition parents into thinking about their children’s transition to kindergarten, the lead researcher created a *Kindergarten*

Experiences section with questions such as “How would you describe your child’s kindergarten year?”, “What did your child like most about kindergarten?”, etc. The lead researcher then narrowed down to questions related to the critical dimensions of the transition to kindergarten process as well as questions about the potential impact of immigration, culture, and race.

Procedure

This study reports qualitative data from a larger mixed-methods study conducted to examine Mexican immigrant parents’ experiences and perspectives related to the transition to kindergarten. The methodology and results reported in this document are reflections of the qualitative component of the study (Beasley, 2013).

Data collection for the qualitative interviews was conducted via individual in-person interviews. Initially, the lead researcher called participants to ask which language they prefer (Spanish or English) and where and when they prefer to hold the interview. An appointment was set for the interview, which was conducted in participants’ preferred language by the lead researcher using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were held in-person at the participants’ preferred location (all participants chose their home). Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 min each and were all conducted during mid-July and mid-August following the academic year within which their child completed

kindergarten. Parents received \$20 for their participation in the interviews.

Analysis

Data analysis began with a transcription of all seven interviews. Five of the seven interviews were conducted in Spanish and were first transcribed into Spanish by the lead researcher and then translated from Spanish to English by another native Spanish speaker. When there seemed to be inaccuracies with the Spanish to English translation, the lead researcher and native Spanish speaker translator reviewed the transcript together and came to a consensus. The two interviews that were conducted in English were transcribed by a native English speaker. Once interview transcriptions were completed, data analyses began.

Data analyses were conducted by the lead researcher in partnership with a colleague with expertise in research conducted with Latinx families as well as experience in qualitative data analyses. The lead researcher and experienced colleague independently read and analyzed all data utilizing the following process as described by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. A similar method of analysis that included reviewing the transcriptions, creating *in vivo* codes, and using marginal marks to develop a list of significant statements and then grouping those statements into larger units of information called meaning units or themes is also suggested by Creswell (2007). Data for each transcription was read in its entirety, with the lead researcher and colleague both highlighting phrases or *in vivo* codes (categories) that emerged from the data as they were repeated throughout the interview. After scanning and highlighting phrases, a preliminary list of codes or categories was created by each individual utilizing a visual data display with the name of the category and actual phrases under each category. Then, each individual's preliminary list of codes was refined. Marginal remarks were used to assist in creating new themes or ideas about the critical dimensions of the transition process (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In order to triangulate the data, the lead researcher and the colleague reviewed the list of themes, which were found to be similar across individuals' analysis. They then collaborated to discuss and compare the results from their coding categories and to verify the final categories related to the research aims of the study. By using this process, it was possible for themes to emerge regarding participants' experiences with their child's transition to kindergarten (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Findings from analysis of interview data revealed 19 group themes that were then coded into the seven categories related to parents' experiences with the transition and organized further into five themes related to parents' experiences during the transition to kindergarten

and parents' beliefs related to the transition to kindergarten. Two additional colleagues with experience in qualitative research related to early care and education and affiliated with the same Institute of Higher Education assisted with the interpretation of the themes related to the research aims of this study and thus, contributed to the study's findings.

Researcher Subjectivity

Researchers need to be attentive to their own subjectivities and bias, and researchers for this project were conscious of their own subjectivities throughout the interview process, data collection process, and during data analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005). During the interviews, it was acknowledged that the lead researcher's own race, linguistic background, gender, and professional experience working with families may have influenced the participants and also is a potential source of bias that could influence the data analysis and interpretation processes.

Additionally, being affiliated with a university as well as working for the school system, the lead researcher was aware that her role in the interview might actually be perceived as one of an authority figure. Therefore, she was conscious of behaviors, language, and even attire when speaking with parent participants. During the interviews, the researcher tried to be professional, respectful, and friendly while maintaining a conversational tone rather than using academic language to help parent participants feel more comfortable with the process. Moreover, the lead researcher made sure that her attire was professional, but not so formal that she would be thought of as an authority figure.

Colleagues who assisted with data analysis and interpretation include three persons affiliated with the same Institution of Higher Education who self-identify as female and are mono-lingual English speakers. In terms of racial/ethnic identity, one colleague is African-American and two are white-American. Recognizing the cultural and linguistic assets of the lead researcher for the study, these colleagues served primarily in the role of verifying and validating the lead researcher's data coding and interpretation throughout the process. Additionally, the research team expressed and identified with social justice ideology and advocacy, as such, the focus of the research and perhaps aspects of interpretation might have been influenced by the researchers' sensitivity to power structures, racism, and discrimination.

Results

Mexican immigrant parent participants in this study were able to tell their stories and share their unique experiences and beliefs related to their children's transition to kindergarten. The themes that emerged are outlined in the following section, organized by research aims.

Parents' and Children's Experiences During the Transition to School

Parent participants in this study discussed their experiences during the transition to school. Two themes emerged as important aspects of their experiences: the kindness they experienced and culturally relevant and respectful communication.

Theme: Kindness

Kindness from various school personnel, such as bus drivers and teachers, was repeatedly mentioned. Parent participants often described personnel with the word "kind" and made references such as "a very kind lady." For instance, Magdalena spoke of the kindness of the teachers when the kids were upset and said, "as a mother [I] saw the kids being treated to see if they were ok." Maria noted that "all the people and the teachers were very kind." The powerful impact of kind staff on transition experiences was emphasized by Maria, who revealed that when her sons' bus driver no longer drove their bus, "they were sad because [of] the following person that arrived, they wanted her to treat them the same [with kindness] and she didn't treat them the same. So all of the days of the week they asked for the [first] lady".

Parent participants also perceived kindness to promote respect and equity in their children's experiences. Magdalena explained that when teachers followed a code of conduct to treat all children equally, parents perceived this as kindness to their children. Specific to marginalized individuals, it was important to the parent participants that "there are some rules that they [teachers] treat all different colors the same", as Magdalena advocated. She felt that teachers followed a code of conduct that enabled them to eliminate racism in their practices and perceived this as demonstrating kindness to their children. Teachers who recognized that all students had needs regardless of cultural or racial background were thought of as kind individuals and were mentioned often as being influential in positive transition experiences. During the transition to kindergarten, parent participants in this study experienced kindness shown through empathetic interactions, and indicated that children noticed when kindness was not portrayed.

Theme: Respectful Communication in Their Home Language

In addition to kindness, parent participants in this study experienced communication that was respectful of their culture by school personnel using their home language, which was very helpful to them in their children's transition. Olivia reflected on her relief that "here at least someone speaks Spanish." Maria was able to compare her sons' schools in the present with her oldest son's past school experiences and commented that "now it is easier. Now in the school there are people that speak Spanish and with him there was no one...so if you didn't speak a little English there was no one to support you." Other parent participants indicated similar experiences, as evidenced by Magdalena's comments:

before he entered school I went to the office and questioned if there was anyone that spoke Spanish and yes, there was the secretary who spoke Spanish and this was the first thing I thought [to myself], 'this is not complicated.'

Although at least one interpreter or Spanish-speaking individual was available in each school, one school had someone who was not as friendly. Lia discussed how one interpreter "really serves [helps you out] well and the other has a face like [a grump]" and "she has a different way, she is not friendly". As this Lia reminded us, sometimes it is not just about having someone who can speak the home language, but it is also about the way in which that person communicates with them. Often, parent participants in this study experienced communication that was respectful and in their home language, but not always.

Parents' Beliefs Related to the Transition to School

The second aim of the study was to describe parents' beliefs as related to their children's transition to school. Parent participants had specific beliefs related to involvement, knowledge and information gathering, and even had beliefs regarding how to emotionally deal with the transition.

Theme: Beliefs About Involvement

Parent participants' ideas about involvement were centered around partnering with schools during and after the transition. Parent participants believed in working together with the school for the benefit of their children. Paula discussed that "if one supports everything, the kids are going to be better off in school", while Maria revealed her beliefs about involvement with the following: "Well, I think that one has to be involved. One should have participation in whatever activity there is in the school. And one wants to have more time, many times, so they can attend, cooperate, help, and

see in what ways they can be involved with their kids at school.” Some felt so strongly about parental involvement that they shared similar sentiments as Olivia that “it is our responsibility more than the teacher.”

Parent participants discussed how involvement also meant supporting children’s education through school activities in or by establishing school-related routines in the context of the home. Maria commented that “the reality is that many times, there is not time in the morning so they [parents] can go [and participate].” Claudia spoke about how in her busy schedule, she knew the time constraints but also knew that “she’s gonna do better even if you just sit with her for 10 min and just play with her. Those 10 min are gonna be really helpful.” Similarly, Lia demonstrated that she planned to work with her daughter in the summer: “I have to do it so she doesn’t forget it and so she learns how to write it, to write it and read it.”

Moreover, parent participants believed that their involvement did not end once their children transitioned to kindergarten. Many parent participants commented that they appreciated the activities that were sent from school to home and this encouraged them to continue to be positively involved in their children’s transition to kindergarten. Activities such as books, reading logs, “flashcards”, daily “folders”, and notes were mentioned by parents during interviews. Parent participants felt like the activities sent home were a way to keep them connected to their children’s education, as Paula revealed, “it is a lot of help that they send the folder and daily we see the colors that they did and there is one [other document in the folder]...it always says in a little note, how much time they have spent with the kids.” Involvement was conceptualized as not only establishing a routine but also as supporting their children’s activities both prior to and after the transition.

Despite having busy lives, parent participants in this study believed in the power of their involvement and realized that they should “just try to do what we can and they [teachers] were going to work with [them] in school” (Claudia) and that they needed to “take our part in helping as parents” (Olivia).

Theme: The Power of Relationships in Acquiring Knowledge

Parent participants believed that relationships with others were a viable source for acquiring knowledge regarding the transition. One parent participant in the study was fortunate enough to have “sisters that are teachers” (Paula) while others used “cousins that went to this school” (Magdalena) as resources for their family. Other parent participants referred to the relationships they had with professionals (such as therapists or parent educators) in the early childhood field as being instrumental to supporting their acquisition of knowledge related to the transition to school.

Parent participants seemed conflicted about and a little unsure about their knowledge on bilingual language development and took advice from professionals/teachers who as Maria put it, “gave us the advice that they should not lose Spanish, that if the English language and all that for example they would learn all of this in the school.”

Paula, for example, spoke highly of “all the teachers she had before Kindergarten with her therapy were very good teachers” while Claudia commented that, “I remember the stuff Heather (therapist) did with [my daughter] so I’m like, I told my mom, I’m gonna do some of the things when Heather worked with [my daughter] with so I started reading, I remember Heather reading [my daughter] books and let her hold the books and the hard books.”

Similarly, another parent participant, Lia, spoke fondly of how much knowledge and support she received from Amanda, her parent educator. Lia felt comfortable asking Amanda questions like “how will the classrooms be or how, they’re not going to lose my child when she starts school or how is the lunch and all of this”. Parents’ ability to have a discussion and conversation about their questions and about the transition process seemed to really have helped parent participants gain knowledge.

Parent participants perceived that some individuals like the parent educator went above and beyond to support parents from a different cultural background to transition smoothly and without fear. For example, Lia commented that her parent educator “brought me a photograph, the photograph showed where [my daughter] was going to go and everything...and so with that, I went, they brought me to pick up my daughter in school and I saw where she was going to be, where it was and Amanda told me it’s going to be here, it’s over here and so I felt a little, a little more calm.”

Parent participants emphasized that relationships with others, as opposed to digital resources (website, etc.), were instrumental in supporting their acquisition of knowledge regarding the transition. Although these relationships are linked to *familismo*, they adapted the concept and at times acquired knowledge from individuals outside their family unit.

Theme: Beliefs About How to Approach the Transition

Some parent participants discussed feeling sadness about the transition like Lia, who discussed that although she had “sadness in her heart” she knew that “things [were] going to pass. They are going to pass. Everything will go.” In cases where parents felt some sadness, they did not dwell on the sadness and instead tried to be hopeful and optimistic instead. Other parent participants did not directly identify the feeling of sadness such as Paula, who said “it’s not sadness—I was very happy that she started school because I know that this was going to help her a lot.” Paula compared

her feelings about her daughter starting school to the “feeling that moms have like when you have to leave them the first day you have to go to work”. Despite feeling “sad in [their] hearts” (Maria), parent participants knew that their children starting school was something necessary. They talked about this transition to school as “something they have to do...a stage, they needed to do it, to learn” (Maria).

Upon reflecting on her feelings about the transition, another parent participant offered this advice to her own children: “That they live in the experience, in the moment because K already passed and they can’t return to K and they have to go to first [grade]” (Maria). Although this was advice she gave her children, any other parent that was interviewed could have easily offered these wise words to both their own children and to other parents alike. Olivia’s piece of advice captured how these Mexican immigrant parent participants reflected on their own educational experiences in Mexico to construct their own more relaxed perspective: “I think that they are going to need to relax...And this is a necessity, to relax because it passes, these concerns pass.”

Parent participants approached the transition with the belief that although challenging, the transition was necessary for their children to have a chance at being successful in life and have a better future. They wanted their children to get the “maximum education”, to “move forward”, wanted “education for [their children]”, and wanted them to “learn a lot and...make a lot of gains”. Additionally, parent participants discussed their desires for their children to have more professional careers than just working in factories. For example, Claudia discussed how her goals for her children were that she didn’t “want them to leave school you know and just end up working in a factory like [her].” Maria agreed with this thought and exclaimed, “we want them to work but with a different schedule and to have a more flexible hour to leave [work]...so they won’t have problems to ask permission to leave like us.”

Aside from studying and advancing in their educational careers, parent participants also wanted their children in general “to be good people”, to “be better than one and have a good job”, “to better oneself” and “to be someone”. They also desired for their children to someday be independent. As evidence of this, Paula commented that not only did she want the “best education” for her daughter, but that she hoped she could “by herself, go up [in life] and not depend on anyone”. In general, Olivia summed it up best by commenting that “we all want the best and that the kids advance more than anything...I know that as a parent, I want them to be someone brilliant in life”.

Thus, although the transition to school evoked feelings of sadness for some; parent participants’ overwhelming belief was that the transition was short-lived and necessary for their children to ultimately have better chances of being successful professionally and personally.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to unearth Mexican immigrant families’ perspectives related to the transition to kindergarten. Our qualitative findings offer new information useful to the field of early childhood education while also supporting and extending findings gleaned from prior research among Mexican immigrant families. For the first aim of the study (to describe experiences with the transition to school), findings suggested that there are a multitude of positive experiences associated with the transition to kindergarten, including kindness and respectful communication, which mirrors what is found in the literature. For the second research aim (to describe beliefs regarding the transition to school), findings suggested that the Mexican immigrant parent participants had strong beliefs that were grounded in their involvement, the importance of relationships in gaining knowledge regarding the transition, as well as regarding maintaining a positive attitude. Findings regarding involvement and the importance of relationships had many parallels to the literature, however our findings demonstrated the nuanced and unique perspective of our participants regarding involvement, relationships, and the attitude in which they approached the transition. This section situates our findings in the broader body of literature with an emphasis on similarities and differences.

Experiences in the Transition to School

Kindness

Parent participants emphasized the importance of having their first contacts and initial interactions with school personnel as setting the tone for not only their children’s transition to kindergarten but also their own.

Parent participants fondly discussed their experiences with persons who were kind, suggesting that being kind was an especially important characteristic for parents’ and children’s first contact with the school setting, as it seemed to set the tone for their transition experiences. Kindness helped them to feel welcome and to see that teachers did care about their children. These findings connected previous studies, which have found that transition activities tend to focus on three key dimensions, one of which is emotional support and encouragement (Malsch et al., 2011) as well as supportive relationships with school personnel (Durand & Perez, 2013).

Respectful Communication

An underlying assumption of family-centered transition practices is that services should be consistent with the home culture, including communication using the family’s home

language (Durand & Perez, 2013; Mangione & Speth, 1998). Limited English proficiency, in particular, often appears in the literature as a significant obstacle to seamless school transitions (Peterson et al., 2018). Findings from this study add to the literature by documenting Mexican immigrant parent participants' voices which indicated that although the home language is important, respectful communication (both verbal and nonverbal) is a key element of positive transition experiences. Parent participants in this study emphasized that having culturally relevant communication was not just about the use of their home language, but also about the respect demonstrated during communications.

Beliefs Related to the Transition to School

Involvement

In general, parent participants believed that they had to take responsibility in educating and supporting their children, especially in the home environment. This is consistent with literature suggesting that Latinx parents are involved both at home and at school (Valencia & Black, 2002). For the parents in this study, there was not a clear separation of involvement at home and school. They believed that their involvement should not cease once the transition ends and school begins. In fact, parent participants' desire to continue involvement after school started was affirmed by their discussion of school to home activities sent home by their children's teachers.

Parent participants connected these school to home activities to their children's progress as one parent participant stated "I believe she advanced a lot [because of these]". For some, it almost seemed as if these school to home activities empowered them to want to be involved more. Parent participants seemed to learn how to better help their children through these activities and in general spoke fondly of the "homework" activities sent home by the teachers at school. Their positive feelings were evident when discussing these home-to-school activities, demonstrating that once students begin school, parent participants believe that their involvement should continue. Importantly, parental involvement as conceptualized by parents in this study, suggests that involvement is multi-dimensional and can include supporting their children in the home environment before and after school starts, focusing on non-academic skills such as establishing routines, and cooperating and helping build the school to home connection extending long past the initial transition to school.

Importance of Relationships

The Mexican immigrant parent participants in this study believed that key people in their supporting relationships

were critical to their gathering of knowledge regarding factors related to the transition. Parents in this study did not just passively acquire information to support their children's transition to school, but rather they actively sought this information through the people in the relationships that surrounded them. Parent participants emphasized that individuals that were outside the traditional family unit were influential in supporting their transition. Whether it was a therapist or parent educator that came into their homes or an 18-year-old daughter of a childcare provider, they believed that seeking information from individuals outside the family unit was important and they then transformed the information into knowledge about the transition to kindergarten. These findings are linked with the literature suggesting that Latinx families value the concepts of *familismo*, however parents in this study seem to have expanded their beliefs regarding the family unit to include those outside of their nuclear family. This expanded idea of *familismo* could have been modified slightly based on parent participants' unique immigration lens.

Approach the Transition with a Positive Attitude

In general, parent participants reflected on the positive attitude in which they approached their children's transition experience. Parent participants seemed to look back on their children's transition experience as something that was highly important and necessary but rather than worrying about it, they remained positive and focused on the opportunities their children would have as a result of their education. The Mexican immigrant parent participants in this study seemed optimistic and had a relaxed point of view consistent with the idea that parents from different cultures might differ in their beliefs because they are immersed in the center of multiple contexts (Rodriguez & Olswang, 2003). They approached the transition with positivity by having goals for their children and focusing on the bigger picture of things in comparison to their experiences in Mexico.

Perhaps because of their experiences with schools in Mexico, parent participants desired for their kids to excel and have better lives than their parents and thus, regarded the transition to school in a positive light and as necessary for the future success of their children. They spoke about their beliefs that education is the key to being successful in life despite the fact that many of these parents did not attain a high educational level themselves. They also seemed to understand that their children had better educational opportunities here in the United States in comparison to Mexican schools. Parent participants also desired for their children to be independent both professionally and personally and viewed the transition to kindergarten as part of this journey to being independent. This may stem from the fact that some of these parents had been dependent on others as part of

their immigrant experience and hoped that their children would not do the same. Mexican immigrant parent participants might have experienced both an unequal distribution of resources in their own culture and a strict dependency on others and thus these experiences might have influenced their beliefs and attitudes towards their children's education and transition to kindergarten. It is important to acknowledge that social and cultural experiences and values may influence parental beliefs and attitudes in unique ways, especially if the social and cultural values could be different than those in America. Mexican immigrant parents who have experienced the inequality in the Mexican education system might refer to their experiences as a frame of reference when approaching the transition to kindergarten. Because of this frame of reference, Mexican immigrant parent participants approached the transition to kindergarten with positive attitudes and were hopeful for their children's opportunities.

Conclusion and Implications

Despite many unique contributions, this study has some limitations. First, the schools associated with this study were only associated with one school district in one part of one state. The schools in this study seemed to be implementing many positive supports and could potentially be above average when compared to other elementary schools in terms of supporting children's transition to school. It is possible that many schools are already implementing transition best practices that they have adapted utilizing a strengths-based lens to see families for who they are, but likely that at least some have not. More research needs to be done to explore the diversity between and within school districts and schools and their acquisition and implementation of transition practices. Second, the voices of only seven Mexican immigrant parents were shared and they were all from one school district. Despite having a group of participants with diverse educational backgrounds, it is still unclear to what extent the role of assimilation played in their experiences and beliefs related to the transition to kindergarten. Research needs to expand to give many more Mexican immigrant parents a voice regarding their experiences and beliefs related to the transition while also considering the role that assimilation might play. Future research is needed to understand, acknowledge, and give Mexican immigrant parents (and all immigrant parents) a voice. After all, it may be that educators share much more similar values and beliefs with Mexican immigrant parents than we thought. Parent participants desired for their children in general "to be good people", "to be better than one and have a good job", "to better oneself" and "to be someone" and in the end, this is the same for what many educators desire as well.

The current study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, the study examined the experiences and beliefs from a specific population that has been understudied. Findings from this study revealed that Mexican immigrant parents experience the transition to school from a unique, culturally-based lens. Finding suggested that parents in this study alluded to the use of a cultural lens, heavily impacted by immigration experiences. This same cultural lens likely impacted how these parents experienced the transition—with kindness and with respectful communication. Parents also approached the transition with optimistic beliefs that the transition was necessary due to their experiences grounded in socio-historical and cultural contexts which influences their cultural lens. The cultural lens plays a role in shaping what parents believe and experience and thus cannot be ignored. Understanding how culture affects the beliefs and values of parents and families can lead us to a greater understanding of how Mexican immigrant families in particular experience the transition to kindergarten. Future research should continue to explore how the cultural lens, specifically related to immigration experiences, can influence parents' experiences and beliefs related to the transition to school. Future research should also explore how factors related to the political and cultural climates of the country and as well as those specific to their communities might impact how Mexican immigrant families experience the transition to kindergarten. For example, are immigrant families experiencing increasing racism, resentment, and stereotyping due to the political and cultural climate or are there buffers within some communities that can positively impact the experiences of immigrant families?

Second, findings suggested that parents prioritized being treated with kindness and respect (specifically with communication) as being critical during the transition. Since schools can be the first societal institution that many immigrant families come into contact with, assuring that transition best practices incorporate ways to help immigrant families feel welcome and valued is of utmost importance. However, transition best practices do not need to be overly complex with numerous professional development sessions and instead should focus on the basic ability to treat others with kindness and to communicate respectfully. These findings have implications for the ways in which educator preparation programs train and teach future teachers and should emphasize that teacher characteristics and dispositions are critical to being able to interact kindly and communicate respectfully with the families of the students in their programs. Additionally, school staff can be made aware of the impact that both verbal and nonverbal language can have in their relationships and interactions with families. Administrators should pay special attention to the characteristics and dispositions of potential employees as both possessing a

kind disposition and being respectful of others are important characteristics.

Consistent with the literature, the family-school connection is a recurring theme on best transition practices and was also a recurring theme related to parents' beliefs about involvement. Deeply woven throughout parents' beliefs was the concept of *familismo* as parents in this study discussed the importance of supportive relationships as well as prioritized their own involvement in their children's education. The parents in this study felt very strongly about being involved in their children's transition to school and education. They also believed and utilized individuals in key relationships expanding ideas about the family unit to help support their children's transition as well as to support their children's education. Implications suggest that finding ways to build on families' beliefs related to *familismo* concepts of closeness, harmony, and support may be beneficial as well as to include individuals beyond the family unit in transition practices as the Mexican immigrant parents did in this study.

Moreover, parents in this study desired to be involved after their children had already started school, suggesting that the definition and timing of transition may be conceptualized differently based on the cultural lens. Extending the family-school connection long past the transition may be important as it seems that families, especially Mexican immigrant families, desire ways to be involved and believe in the power of their involvement. Additionally, future transition practices should focus on the availability of these relationships centered in *familismo* to Mexican immigrant families where programs and policies should consider a *familismo* relationship program where families have access to individuals to support them and answer their questions prior to the transition to school. Research should also continue to examine and build on this concept of *familismo*, emphasizing closeness, harmony, and support while focusing on the family as a unit in efforts of involvement in children's transition and education in general. Families can play a crucial and irreplaceable role in not only the transition to school but throughout children's academic journey.

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