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Building on the Hopes and Dreams of Latino Families with Young Children: Findings from Family Member Focus Groups

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Abstract In the past, Latino families were often regarded as being uninvolved in their child's education, particularly within the parent involvement literature. More recently, authors are encouraging educational professionals to look at a family's "funds of knowledge" to encourage their involvement. This expression takes into account the knowledge a teacher can gain from a family and child, including awareness of culture, familial background, and other contributions the family can add to the child's education. This article reviews findings from the analyses of focus groups conducted with Latino family members who have a child(ren) enrolled at a Head Start Center. Findings indicate that Latino families openly communicated strengths, interests, aspirations and learning opportunities for their child and family yet often faced barriers in conveying these to teachers and other staff in their child's life. Implications for using inquiry-based approaches to bridge this gap in family-school communication are discussed.

Keywords Latino families · Family involvement · Head start · Funds of knowledge · Natural learning opportunities · Focus groups

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Introduction

"The essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive" (Moll 1992, p. 21) is a well-known and well-cited definition of the term funds of knowledge. Researchers in family engagement and educational fields have used Moll's funds of knowledge paradigm to reframe approaches to support Latino families and children. Moll and colleagues' various studies involving primarily families of Mexican origin (see González et al. 2005; Moll et al. 1992) have portrayed the idea that funds of knowledge encapsulates "[t]he lives of ordinary people, their everyday activities, and what has led them to the place they find themselves" (González et al. 2005, p. 1). The primary research tools in these studies were the teachers themselves; that is, teachers learned about ethnographic data collection techniques and then applied these methods in home visits to discover information about the families of children in their classrooms, including conversations with and observations of families in their homes. An integral piece of the funds of knowledge approach is not only accessing the family knowledge, but also utilizing that knowledge within individualized learning opportunities within the classroom (or home setting) (González 2005).

Home visits, like those used by Moll and the teachers involved in his research, are only one example of educational communication. Home-school communication refers to a variety of interactions between parents, family members, and educators. Newsletters, conferences, notes sent home, informal conversations, and more formal paperwork (such as IEPs) all fall within the category of communication between home and school (Gregg et al. 2011). Oftentimes this type of communication within school settings operates on a one-way street (Graham-Clay 2005).

That is, schools inform parents about school policies, children's educational status and progress, and activities occurring within the classroom. Commonly, teachers seek out parents only when required (annual conferences) or when the news about the child is less than satisfactory (e.g., a child is "acting up" in class). Schools request information from families with much less frequency (Hughes and Greenhough 2006). An inquiry-based approach to communication can encourage a reciprocal relationship between teachers and families.

Historically, "[p]oor and minority students were viewed with a lens of deficiencies, substandard in their socialization practices, language practices, and orientation toward scholastic achievement" (González 2005, p. 34). McCarthey (2000) suggests that this deficit view in turn affects both classroom practices and home-school environments. For example, teaching techniques grounded in rote learning can result in lowered expectations for students. Initial judgments, particularly those coming from a deficit perspective, can negatively influence the interactions between parents and teachers. Teachers prejudging a family based on their cultural identity, name, or socioeconomic status can set a relationship up to be unconstructive and even harmful to the student's potential success (Souto-Manning 2009).

Beliefs about a parent's role within a child's education can influence the amount and type of communication between family member and teacher. Cultural values may contribute to the role a parent has created for him or herself within a school (Gou 2006; Inger 1992). An educator who creates an unwelcoming environment for family members limits the opportunities for the exchange of information between home and school (Lian and Fontánez-Phelan 2001).

Studies have demonstrated that a child's educational success improves when there is more continuity in home-school communication (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 1999). One problem with establishing continuity between diverse students and teachers is cultural understanding. That is, families with the same cultural "label" can and often do operate from different cultural frameworks (González 2005). Two families of Mexico descent may vary greatly in their beliefs, values, language use, and family life. Therefore, learning about Mexican–American families in general may provide a hint into family culture, but would be similar to expecting all families born in the United States to operate under the same value system and offer the same resources to their child's education.

Whether in face-to-face meetings or written notes, language can hinder communication for families in the US learning English or who do not speak English. Translated messages may be misinterpreted, particularly if a child becomes a parent's primary interpreter of written and/or spoken information (Gou 2006). Overall, in thinking about home-school communication, teachers and parents must work together to overcome barriers due to language differences and deficit-portraying stereotypes (Souto-Manning and Swick 2006). Learning about a child and family is one way to begin down the path toward a respectful bidirectional relationship (Gregg et al. 2011).

Learning about a child's interests and connecting these with their developmental and learning goals increases opportunities to engage children while increasing their academic success (Dunst et al. 2001). For example, if children in a classroom need to work on their large motor skills and many of the children enjoy listening to and dancing to music, this would provide an immediate learning-interest connection. To take this idea a step further, if a child is indifferent to participating in a music activity, talking with the family about songs the child enjoys may increase motivation to participate; thus engaging the child through home and school knowledge.

González (2005) describes using a funds of knowledge approach when "student experience is legitimated as valid, and classroom practice can build on the familiar knowledge basis that students can manipulate to enhance learning…" (p. 43). Through home visits, Sandoval-Taylor (2005) noticed the theme of construction and construction projects located in multiple homes. In her chapter "Home is where the heart is," she created a curriculum module around construction knowledge which was familiar to her students, who were primarily minority backgrounds in the United States. Sandoval-Taylor (2005) allowed the students to be experts in teaching peers the knowledge each had already acquired through their construction experiences at home. Her discussions with students and families on home visits lead to the development of an entire class project around their responses.

Edwards and Alldred (2000; as cited in Hughes and Greenhough 2006) "argued that although children are widely viewed as active agents within the sociology of childhood, much official discourse on parental involvement appears to regard them as passive recipients of whatever actions are carried out by their parents and teachers" (p. 473). Taking a natural learning opportunities approach encourages students' interests, strengths, and motivations to be actively embedded into academic programming within classrooms as well as learning in home and community settings (Dunst et al. 2001). Helping families to gain a better understanding of classroom practices is an important piece of home-school communication but without access to family knowledge, more natural learning opportunities are limited. Hughes and Greenhough (2006) described how teachers capitalized on student-generated knowledge into the curriculum through a shoebox project. Over the summer, students, with family help, filled shoeboxes with meaningful items. Teachers were then able to

build on the information communicated through the items in the shoeboxes when crafting in-class activities; primarily within writing activities. This shoebox activity could easily have become strictly an artifact approach to cultural understanding, but because teachers took the items a step further (e.g., having children craft stories about experiences related to the items) the process more closely resembles an interest-based learning opportunity.

Applying a funds of knowledge approach to parent-teacher communication can encourage family engagement and build stronger bonds between home and school. Furthermore, teachers who utilize funds of knowledge in their classroom will be able to intentionally connect culture with learning. This can encourage authentic types of learning activities and increase children's motivation for learning and comfort in their classroom setting (González 2005).

Creating settings for teachers and families to discuss a child's interests and strengths to use within learning opportunities was one of the primary goals of the *Míreme* [Take a Look at Me] portfolio project. This project was a Head Start Innovation and Improvement grant funded to increase family engagement at a Head Start center through a strengths-based portfolio system and then to evaluate the effects of this intervention within the center. This portfolio was a family-created tool that was being utilized to improve the quantity and quality of the relationships between family members, children, and educators. This paper spotlights results from Latino family focus groups conducted as part of the *Míreme* project.

Methods

The Head Start Setting

The Head Start Center in which the project was being implemented enrolled 280 children. Over 50% of these families self-identified as Latino. The majority of the Latino parents and guardians spoke primarily or only Spanish and many were recent immigrants to the country. Of the 36 teachers in the center, one lead teacher and nine assistant teachers spoke Spanish. Each family was assigned one of the seven family partners employed at the Head Start Center. Family partners' responsibilities included helping families with enrollment, finding community resources, and setting family goals. Of the seven family partners, only two spoke fluent Spanish. Those two were often pulled in classrooms to interpret conversations between teachers and family members.

Family Member Recruitment

This article reports the findings from four focus groups with Latino family members that were conducted prior to the initiation of the larger portfolio project. The *Míreme* onsite project coordinator recruited family members for these groups. The group sizes ranged from 2 to 8. A total of 14 participants attended the four Spanish speaking focus groups. Family members across focus groups consisted of 10 mothers, three fathers and one aunt. The family members represented a total of 19 children at the Head Start Center. Five families participating had two children enrolled at the center. The children ranged in ages from three to 5 years old. Many of the families also had older and younger children who were not enrolled in the center.

Data Collection

The primary rationale for using focus group interviews for this project was three-fold: (1) building a strengths-based family engagement program and to document the range of descriptions families had to offer, (2) uncovering factors currently creating issues and encouragement in communication between Latino families and teachers, and (3) encouraging families to begin engaging in discussions regarding the positive aspects and strengths of their children and families. Each of these reasons corresponds with using focus groups interviews for data collection. By bringing together multiple individuals one time, more varied data could be gathered (Krueger and Casey 2000).

Many insights that are produced in focus group settings would be unobtainable without the group dynamics (Morgan 1997). For the families in this study, interactions promoted discussion and moderators prompted each person to share her/his responses on each question. Family members responded to one another, agreed and disagreed, and built on what the previous participant had shared. Without these interactions and discussions, the data would have been missing key insights that can only be found when in discussion with others who can relate to one another on a specific topic (Morgan 1997).

Focus groups were conducted at the Head Start Center in a classroom set up for teacher trainings and parent workshops. Because children at this particular Head Start were required to be picked up and dropped off (i.e., there was no transportation provided by the school), focus groups were scheduled immediately after drop off or before pick up of the children. Families were also surveyed about their preference for times to attend the focus groups. Focus groups were video recorded as well as audio recorded. Each participant had a name plate placed in front of her or him in order to identify who was speaking for transcription purposes.

The moderator for the focus groups, a PhD student in a Marriage and Family Therapy program, was fluent in Spanish and experienced in facilitating group discussions. The moderator was provided with a script for focus groups

which included opening/greeting, directions to the participants, explanation of the project, use of the collected data, and the focus groups questions (see the "Appendix").

The scripted questions for each group were in place in order to compare and contrast responses across groups (Krueger and Casey 2000). The questions were given to the moderator in English prior to each focus group so that she could familiarize herself with the script and ask any questions regarding translation of specific terms or items that were project or program related (e.g., family partners/ compañeros familiares). The moderator always ended by offering participants a chance to contribute any comments that they felt they did not have an opportunity to share during the discussions spurred on by focus group questions.

Data Analysis

The four focus groups were transcribed and translated by a fluent Spanish speaker (a Spanish teacher and researcher). Furthermore, the transcripts were rechecked for accurate translation by the *Míreme* onsite project coordinator, a native Spanish speaker, in order to ensure that those terms embedded with the project and program were understood correctly in context and to listen to and clarify the participants' statements.

With the purpose of the focus groups in mind, I[1] began to engage in coding the data utilizing the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti. Coding was completed based on a deductive strategy. A handful of themes were created starting before the analysis began based on the list of interview questions in the "Appendix". These themes included: description (of child or family), communication with teachers, communication with family partners, and home-school learning. Codes came directly from themes or were expansions of themes; following an analysis method as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). A breakdown of themes and their corresponding codes can be seen in Fig. 1. Inductive codes and themes were created as necessary when an important piece of information was communicated by a participant but did not fall within predetermined themes (Krueger and Casey 2000). The findings section was delineated by the most commonly reiterated themes by the participants.

Findings

Family-Generated Knowledge

The family-generated knowledge theme was derived from responses to the first two primary questions from the focus groups (see questions in the "Appendix"). The codes

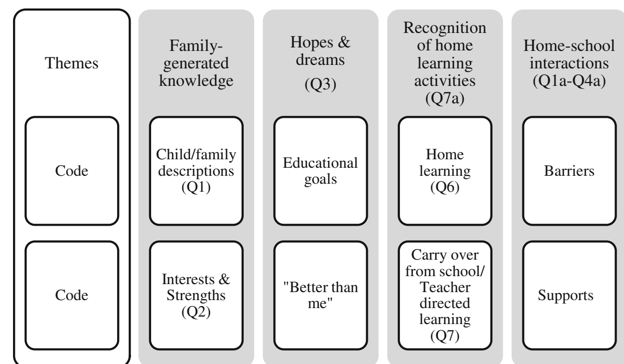

Fig. 1 Categories and codes reduced from the family focus group data. "Q" represents the corresponding question from the Appendix

represented under this theme included child/family descriptions and interests and strengths. This was the knowledge that families have and communicated during the focus groups regarding their own resources and strengths.

Families shared descriptions of their children situated both educationally and at home. For example, one mother of a young girl described her daughter's experience with books at home and school; "She's interested in books. She'll read it [at Head Start] and take it home and repeat it and repeat it so that it will stick." A father discussed his son and how he had changed since he started at the Head Start center; "Before he came to school, he wasn't interested in writing. He didn't like it. But now he comes to school and it interests him. Yeah, he likes to come to school and books. So, just, I noticed a difference between before he came to school and after. Yeah, it's like awakened an interest in studying, because he wasn't interested before."

Parents also described their children in terms of the activities they enjoyed (and didn't enjoy) at home. One parent noted about her son, "He liked to run, run and play… Not even TV, he doesn't like TV either. Like he'll be watching TV and jumping around and talking. Or he'd take all the cushions off the couch and I'd ask him 'are you watching TV or are you playing?'" This information about a child's activity level could affect the expectations a teacher has for her students in large group/circle time in the preschool classroom. The teacher would want to make sure and include times for the children to get up and move. Activities were an important part of other parents descriptions, "Yeah, so what she likes to do most is drawing. She draws all afternoon at home." Parents also talked about their children enjoying watching particular shows on TV, playing outside with friends, siblings and/or cousins, and playing in general.

Descriptions from family members included characteristics about their children. One mother discussed how her

[1] From this point in the paper on, "I" will refer to the first author.

activity was affected by her son, “I need to give him lots of attention, because he is very intelligent.” She went on to describe that she believed he would eventually be in advanced classes in school. Another parent described her son’s “musical ability” as “He hears a song, he catches the rhythm… It’s pleasing for a parent to discover her child’s abilities so they can focus them for when they’re adults.” Focusing on her son’s strengths this mother pointed out, “As a parent, [I] can see the strengths so that they will be more distinguished adults.”

Focus group participants were asked to go beyond their child’s descriptions and discuss the strengths they saw for their families as a whole. One mother discussed how her children’s interest could become something the whole family participated in, such as “watching the TV channels with animals…we get interested in that… they’ll get their favorite books and go home and read them together with us.” Other families commented on the importance of spending time together. For example, one mother mentioned that “my family is not numerous, but the few of us that there are try to be united and supportive.” This description exemplifies the thoughts that many of the families had for their children. Meal times and routines were included in the time families enjoyed together; “It’s really important to be together, to share together at dinner. Well, there’s four of us and we’re always there talking about what happened during the day.”

Some participants mentioned unstable situations that affected their families’ resources. The economy currently in the country was a topic many families commented on; “We’re united and I want a stable state for my kids, but my husband’s out of work and me too, and we’re worried about that. So things are tense, but we try to be united.” Another mother’s comment emphasized the effect the volatility of the economy had on their decision-making as a family;

> Right now we don’t know what to support them in, because of the situation this country’s in. It’s hard to decide what to do, to stay here or go to our country. Like we’ve planned to stay a few years here and return to [Mexico], but we don’t know what’s going to happen during these next years.

In gaining a clear picture of a family, it is their communicative opportunities as well as their concerns that influence their relationship with the education system. Although only referred to once within the context of the focus groups, Latino families within this center have had to cope with the fears associated with any type of government agency. One mother mentioned how this affected her older daughter, “Sometimes there are problems when you don’t have your papers. Right now, one of my daughters has very good grades. They’re sending her invitations to go to Washington and since she doesn’t have papers, she can’t go.” In the spring prior to the release for summer break, a license check was set up by local authorities less than a mile from the school. This caused many families to miss the last few days of school either due to fear of another road block or because a family member was apprehended during the license check. There are implications for communication with educators when families are scared to make contact with individuals in any type of position of power.

Overall, families were encouraging about the people their children had grown into thus far. The families described what their children’s interests were and how, for some, school has affected their interests. Participants discussed what their families did together and that they tried to be supportive of one another. Finally, families expressed concern regarding how the instability of family situations could affect the opportunities they had.

Hopes and Dreams for Children

Aspirations that parents had for their children were communicated in response to the third primary question regarding hopes and dreams that families had for their children. Families emphasized two key hopes: to get an education and to move beyond what the parents had achieved. One parent commented on how education would become a strength for her children: “We don’t have any more family [in the country] but it seems the same to both of us [parents] that what’s most important is to give the kids an education and be watchful of their studies. And that in the future will be my kids’ strengths.” Another mother commented in regards to her own past and education that

> I missed it. I lost my way and that was it. I met my husband and that was it. Probably if I had a definite goal, do this, get this, it would be something different. Getting married…so since I had no other goal, I got married. And if I can do it, I would like to do that for them because we four brothers and sisters and it was the middle sister that graduated. Not us. It would have been better if all four of us had graduated, and I want that for [my daughter]. She probably can do it. To work all day, but to have a better life. She needs to know what to do to get a better job. If I had studied…

This sentiment was reflected when another mother stated,

> I think the best thing to do is… about the goals and hopes of our children, I would like it if, I don’t know, there’s some way… to inoculate [my son] not just to study as such… a broader way to show [my son] how to graduate, because I realize that already… to graduate, to have a better life, because they always told me that studying and all that… in my head, it

> was incomplete. I would like for them to keep doing the same, because the fact that they can graduate and lead a better life.

Parents wanted a different path for their children than the one the parents themselves had taken.

Recognition of Home Learning Activities

During the focus groups, discussions around natural learning opportunities for their children were a result of questions regarding both parent directed family and child activities (sixth question) and being able to carry over school activities into home settings (seventh question). The families connected their child's interests that they described earlier in response to the first focus group question to their child's learning. One mother explained this in detail:

> We try to combine both things, what the child is interested in and what she needs, because many times children say 'no! I don't want it!' or 'I already know how!'… And if I see a lack of interest, I look for a more entertaining way to explain it so as not to bore the child or tire him. And yeah, if you talk to him patiently, the child will do it.

In discussing how her children were learning at home, a mother of two noted, "They choose what they want to do, whatever activities they want to do. I know that helps them, if they choose something that helps them in their development, be it mental or of the muscles or I don't know, everything!" This mother pointed out that child-directed activities can be opportunities for children to work on gross motor and cognitive skills. Parents found ways that their children were learning at home such as, writing with chalk on the sidewalk, going to the park to climb and "drive little cars," coloring and writing, using the computer, table manners at dinner and using magnetic letters. One parent discussed how her children were learning religious routines at home,

> We pray beforehand, and the older one already knows. She's already like this [*bows her head*] and she is always like 'Amen! Amen!' We're interested in the Bible. We like that a lot. There are lots of stories there. And it helps my daughter in school because it has her reading and all that.

Religious activities were a strength of the family and an interest they shared. Other families also mentioned that children were involved in religious activities including "learning to love God." The families' descriptions of religious beliefs often coincided with the values they said they were teaching their children such as "to coexist with others." Other values that the family members wanted their children to learn included: the importance of studying and education, helping with or teaching younger siblings, respecting others, and completing their responsibilities in the home. For example, a mother discussed how she wanted her children to

> Know what their responsibilities are. I tell the boy 'you have to teach your sister [that she] has to pick up her toys, because she throws them. I taught you, now you teach your sister.' Because many times I can't, 'now you're big, so teach her how to do it.' And he does without getting mad, he knows.

One parent epxlained how her child learned both at home and at school, but in a different way, as follows: "I like that she is coming here too because [the teacher] knows that at home I teach her like a foundation but here [my daughter] is learning to get organized."

While discussing the idea of home-school learning with the parents, participants mentioned the Head Start center's use of what the school calls "home learning activities" and what many of the parents called "homework." Each week in the Head Start classrooms and each day in the Early Head Start classrooms, most teachers sent home these handouts that contain an activity or idea for learning at home. One parent referred to both the home learning activities and their encouragement of home learning in the following quote,

> But from the beginning, my husband and I have said, 'let's go see this, let's look at these colors, review what you did in school, and what does this mean?' I ask her and she always answers me, 'Look! This is a house. This is a flower.' Or something like that. But I tell her, 'Look, this is how you do this.' I teach her and it makes her very happy when we're there reviewing. She says that it's her homework. They're little drawings, but it's really important for her. So both of them, since my husband and I are always with the children every day, checking homework, reviewing whatever they do, making sure they're doing well in school.

A mother described the activities this way,

> In general, they give you instructions, they send them home with the kids. Sometimes it's a list of words that we have to work with to reinforce vocabulary, pronunciation, all that. So they give us ideas of how to work with their weaknesses first as well as… the child easily cuts things with scissor, so stimulate him. So yeah, they send home instructions.

The mother went on to comment on how the teachers wanted parents to pay more attention at home to helping their children learn through these weekly or daily

instructions. All the family members seemed to see these activities as positive for their children. One mother mentioned how she adapts the activities for her children,

> I try to have things that extend their learning here. So for example they work on their fine and gross motor skills here, so I try to have games for them to do that and have things that help them continue their development.

Overall families communicated their techniques for helping their children learn. Many parents also discussed the importance to teaching what their values to the children. While some of these techniques were teacher supplemented, many families were able to connect their child's interests to the learning activities, extend classroom learning to home and describe their own ways to teach and interact with their child in the community setting or at home.

Home–School Interactions

The home–school interactions theme was primarily a result of many of the secondary focus groups questions (see the "Appendix"). These dealt with communicative opportunities that families had with teachers specifically related to their child's interests, family resources, and teachers' ability to connect home learning to their specific child. As was described in the last paragraph, home school interactions included instances of teacher-directed home learning. But there was a disconnect that emerged from these families' accounts which was located within the use of their child's interests, a family's goals for their child, and other family funds of knowledge to guide activities for home and school learning. As quickly as the question, "Do teachers use your children's strengths and interests to help your child learn at home? At school?" was asked, came the answer, of "No." A parent rephrased the question and summed up her thoughts,

> The question is whether or not the teachers support the strong points of each child, right? I would say no because for example in my case they give my kid homework, but it really needs to come up a little bit… she doesn't tell me about his strengths, his strong points. I would say 'no' to that.

Parents commented on the barriers and the supports that they felt affected their interactions with the school. As was expected, and as has been described in research previously (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute 2004; Lian and Fontánez-Phelan 2001), differences in language are an embedded part of the interactions between home and school. Interestingly in this study, families reported language as both a support and a barrier to communication with teachers. Families who had a teacher or even a family partner who spoke Spanish described more satisfactory relationships with school staff than did those whose children's teachers only spoke English. One mother described her communication with her child's teacher;

> With my child, yes. The [teacher] goes to me and tells me what she is doing and….many times invites us to eat with them, whenever we want to come with them to lunch, or when they're doing their activities, she always says we can come over. When I have conferences, she invites me to eat with her. Sometimes one doesn't come or doesn't have the time, but yes she invites us to communicate.

When asked about barriers related to communicating with their child's teacher (or family partner), some parents immediately responded language or "English", above all other barriers. For example, one mother stated,

> I speak a little [English], not much, and I try to make myself understood, but I think with the teachers the barrier is English. What happens is they'll tell me, 'You can come volunteer' and I'll say 'I don't work. I can come.' But I don't understand what they're saying! That impedes me. Not knowing English.

It is significant to point out that this mother saw herself as the barrier by not understanding or speaking English rather than the teacher not speaking Spanish. An aunt commented that "if we could communicate a little better, then we would not have to be like 'hey can you please tell her this, that?' It's our responsibility too. I'm going to put more effort into it and learn more." Her sister followed up with, "We learn with the kids" indicating that the children often taught parents some of the English language that the children learned in school.

Another mother noted:

> There are lots of opportunities [to communicate]… I come straight here because I do not work so anything that they're doing, I'll come to the class and watch. I'll go up to the teacher or the assistant, whoever's available to talk, 'how did he act? What's he doing well?'…As especially with [the special education assistant], if something has to be interpreted I'll talk with the [family partner]. She helps me.

While this example was interactive, it also had an embedded communication barrier. Like rote learning, this could be labeled as rote parent-teacher communication. When communicating informally, parents and teachers may lack substance in their conversations and only focus on how the child acted that day. A father discussed these informal interactions,

> With the teachers, its good. They give us information. If there's something different, they give us information. At times it's more complicated like when I come to drop off or pick up the kids, the information is minimal… it's a little more difficult to find out what's going on.

The father's description of being "given information" if "there's something different" was suggestive of the one-way street approach to home–school communication.

Language was a barrier for these families but parents did mention the conferences that the center holds as an opportunity to share with teachers. The conferences are multiple times a year and as one father stated, "in the meetings where the parents are there, there's an interpreter." Other parents have other family members who speak English and they translated between parent and teacher. For one parent, her sister always attended the school with her for meetings or when she needed to talk to the child's teacher. Another parent mentions that, "when my husband and I come to school they communicate with us and all that, but when I come by myself, it's hard for me because I understand less…" Many of the parents hoped that they would learn English, yet pointed out that there was little time to do so with taking care of their children and working. One father summed it up as, "Language, it's a barrier, a barrier between people."

Parents explained that logistical issues were also a barrier in interactions with the school. Time came up in all focus groups and was second in frequency to only language. One parent summarized what many of the parents referred to,

> There's no time. That is to say I don't blame the teacher or anything like that, they have twenty kids, lots of responsibilities, watching twenty. Unless they have an interest to ask… And I understand. I don't blame them, but a teacher doesn't know the habits of a family, but they know them because they know how the child is. They pick up on a lot of details of how a family is from the kids, the teachers do and they are directly related, but there's no time for that.

Also, related to time, some parents mentioned the issue with specific times at the school when they couldn't come in the building. For safety reasons, this particular program has doors that were locked all the time and anyone who needed to enter had to be buzzed in. The program did not allow anyone to enter 15–20 min prior to drop off and pick up of the children. Parents expressed their frustration with this system. For example, a mother stated that, "you can't come whenever you want though. You can't come at such and such a time." One parent mentioned that this could be remedied by calling ahead, "I've come ahead of time because I have spoken with them… But if not, they won't [open the door]."

Overall the primary barriers to interactions between home and school were described in terms of language and time. Language was most frustrating for parents who did not speak any English and whose children's teachers did not speak any Spanish. Many parents accommodated by having another family member or a school staff member translate to have a conversation with their children's teachers. Time, although not discussed as often as language barriers, created an obstacle that was difficult for both parents and teachers to overcome. The interactions that were often described were examples of rote parent-teacher communication.

Limitations

Even with a qualitative study, the small sample size could be a limitation. With that said, qualitative research offers window into the lives of these particular Latino families and provides an outlet for their voices to be recognized. The families' abilities to share strengths and understand learning opportunities can encourage thinking about interactions between those with and without the authoritative voice. Using the questions to guide the initial data reduction is another potential limitation to the study. Patton (2002) describes a type of inductive analysis called "analytical" which he explains as "sometimes…qualitative analysis is first deductive or quasi-deductive and then inductive as when, for example, the analyst begins by examining the data in terms of theory-driven sensitizing concepts or applying a theoretical framework developed by someone else…" (p. 454). Thus, using inductive analysis provides the freedom to move between deductive and inductive coding.

Discussion

The voices of the parents in the focus groups underscore the importance of not only listening to Latino parents of young children, but engaging families in inquiry-based communication. The voices of Latino families, particularly those in low-income families often are marginalized. Parent involvement practices typically place families in the role of the receiver of information rather than imploring teachers to create a situation where teachers learn from Latino families. A funds of knowledge approach uses innovative practices, including borrowing from ethnography, qualitative research, and other creative approaches like a family-generated portfolio (Gregg et al. 2011) or family photographs (Allen et al. 2002) to help practitioners

and researchers alike to discover resources and insights families can offer to contribute to their child's education. While focus groups are not as intense a process as the ethnographic approaches in the funds of knowledge home visits employed by Moll and colleagues (Moll et al. 1992; Moll and Greenberg 1990), the particular questions asked positioned families within a strengths-based discussion regarding their children and resources. Applying a funds of knowledge perspective to home-school communication encourages inquiry and learning when engaging with families and children (González et al. 2005).

Beyond taking an inquiry-based approach, there are other examples of techniques to encourage a welcoming feeling that is necessary to begin building respectful relationships with families. Reaching families where they are (Matthews and Jang 2007) is a strategy embedded within a funds of knowledge approach that encourages discovering family resources and using that as a starting point for building a relationship with that family. This may also include working with the family in areas they would like to strengthen; using an inquiry-based approach would help prompt these discussions with families.

Another strategy to encourage Latino family involvement is creating a language access plan (Matthews and Jang 2007). Families in this study brought up language consistently as a barrier to connecting with teachers. Creating a language access plan within the program includes going beyond typically strategies such as translating documents and using interpreters to reaching out to other community resources and community leaders. For Latino families this could be through the church or other organizations that work with Latino families. These leaders may come from within the school system. For example, the *Míreme* onsite project coordinator interacted with families on such a regular and personal basis that families began to confide in her and open up expressing both successes and concerns for their child. As evidenced by the results of these focus groups, parents who had a Spanish speaking teacher felt more comfortable approaching a teacher than did those who did not. This plan can incorporate other family members, as with the participants in the focus groups. Inviting family members or other advocates of the family not only establishes a relationship with that family but also includes other perspectives on the family's strengths that can inform teachers' practice.

Gathering funds of knowledge from families, teachers can then connect families' cultural knowledge with learning practices and help families recognize these connections. In the focus groups, parents' discussions on home-learning were creative, thoughtful, and fit the criteria for natural learning opportunities. Families demonstrated that they have the ability to recognize their child and family's strengths and interests as well as discuss how they help their child learn at home. Engaging in a inquiry-based paradigm when communicating with families, teachers will discover new things about a child and family background that can then be appropriately integrated in classroom curriculum and child-directed learning opportunities. Furthermore, teachers can encourage parents to see that many of the activities they engage in at home have educational components and that these can promote their child's educational success. Encouraging families to support their children's continued learning outside of school through activities already embedded into the families' routines honors and respect the families' traditions and expertise.

Through engaging in data reduction of family focus groups, themes emerged that identify families as being able to communicate and discuss family-generated knowledge, but often feeling there were barriers to sharing this information with educators within their children's program. The themes that emerged—family-generated knowledge, recognition of home learning opportunities and interaction of home and school—are related in a cyclic nature but this circle is broken and barred by barriers to communicative practices. Teachers may be able to learn from families regarding what parents see as strengths and goals for their child and then embed this learning within their classroom practices. The family-generated knowledge and recognition of home learning opportunities conveyed by family members in the focus groups could be sought out by teachers through an inquiry-based approach to communicating with families. Teachers are often expected to instruct families how to educate children in the home and community (i.e., this Head Start's distribution of "home learning activities") but these data suggest that teachers could become the recipient of information as they learn from the ways families have discovered to engage children in natural learning opportunities.

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Appendix: Focus Group Questions Provided to the Moderator

Q1. Tell me about your child's strengths and interests.

Q1a. Tell me about the opportunities you have to share information about your child's strengths and interests with your child's teacher(s).

Q2. Tell me about your family's strengths and interests.

Q2a. Do you have the opportunity to share them with your child's teacher(s)?

Q3. Tell me about the hopes and dreams you have for your child.

Q3a. Tell me about the opportunities you have to share your hopes and dreams for your child with your child's teacher(s).

Q4. How often do you communicate with your child's teachers and family partners?

Q4a. Tell me about any barriers you have experiences in communicating with your child's teachers and family partners.

Q5. Does your child's teacher help to identify ways your child can learn at home and at school that are linked to your child's strengths and interests?
Q6. Tell me about what your child learns at home.
Q7. Have you been able to take some of the things your child is learning in school and carry them over into your home activities?

Q7a. What does this look like (learning at home)?

**Primary questions are bulleted and secondary or follow-up questions are indented.

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