

Immigrant Latino Parents’ Experiences and Participation in the Special Education Process

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Abstract

This inquiry examined the experiences of first-generation immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities while navigating the special education system and how those experiences influenced their participation in the special education process. The study included a purposive sample of 50 participants living in Louisiana homes where Spanish was the primary language. A researcher-created survey including Likert scale items and optional space for additional comments was used to collect the data. Quantitative data were examined using descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data gathered from participants’ comments were analyzed for patterns and themes. Although half of the participants had emerging English language skills, they communicated and often collaborated with school personnel. Most participants trusted professionals, had a positive perception of school personnel, and disagreed with statements suggesting that teachers knew best about their children’s needs. Participation in the special education process was influenced by the children’s disability and the parents’ knowledge of the American education system, among other factors.

Keywords: Latino parents, immigrants, children with disabilities, parental participation, special education process

Parental involvement plays an essential role in the academic performance of students from all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Jeynes, 2005, 2007). Parents can positively influence their children’s academic achievement by helping them understand the purpose of education, teaching them effective academic socialization strategies, modeling and reinforcing desired school-related skills and behaviors, communicating their educational expectations, and supporting their children’s educational aspirations (Englund et al., 2008; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hong &

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Ho, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Stewart, 2008). If a child has a disability, parental involvement can also facilitate academic success by allowing parents to better understand their children's school-related needs and intervene on their behalf when necessary (McDonnall et al., 2010).

As Latinos become the largest ethnic minority group in the US (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), some educators may feel apprehensive about the potential intricacies of collaborating with Latino parents. Latino students attending American K–12 schools are at an increased risk of academic failure (Hurtado et al., 2010), presumably due to their emergent English language skills, lack of formal instruction before moving to the US, and low socioeconomic backgrounds (Abedi, 2004; Jimenez, 2004; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2002). Although the positive role of parental involvement in the academic achievement of Latino students is clear (Jeynes, 2017; Kupermic et al., 2008; Marschall, 2006), some studies suggest that is a decreased level of parental involvement in the Latino population (Tinkler, 2002; Turney & Kao, 2009). Direct involvement in school activities allows parents to become familiar with schools' expectations for students and their parents. Thus, a lack of involvement in school activities—whether due to personal choice, contextual constraints related to parents' additional responsibilities (e.g., work schedule) and limited resources (e.g., lack of transportation), or the school's inability or unwillingness to support participation (e.g., not providing an interpreter) and accommodate parents (e.g., not making an effort to host meetings and events at a more convenient time)—may put Latino parents at a disadvantage when guiding their children in school-related matters. In the case of students with disabilities, when parents do not participate in school activities or formal meetings, there may be fewer opportunities for them to develop the social capital needed to build collaborative relationships with school personnel, and this may leave them without a voice in educational decisions made for their children.

Parental participation in the special education process encourages school accountability and increases the chance that students with disabilities will receive appropriate education and services (Trainor, 2010b). In addition to engaging in activities typically associated with parental involvement (e.g., assisting with or encouraging their children to complete school-related tasks), involved parents of children with disabilities can help educators better understand their students' strengths and needs and can lead to a collaboration with school staff to develop responsive educational plans. As such, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997; IDEIA, 2004) emphasizes the importance of parental participation in the education of children with disabilities, identifying parents as active participants in their children's educational decision-making process. However, participation in the special education process can pose significant challenges for many parents of children with disabilities (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). For many Latino parents of children with disabilities, the general challenges associated with participation in the special education process can be compounded by significant cultural and linguistic differences and immigration status. To facilitate these parents' participation in the education of their children with disabilities, including in the special education process, educators must understand immigrant Latino parents' behaviors and attitudes related to parental participation from a culturally responsive and responsible perspective that rejects stereotypes and considers the roles of all stakeholders in perpetuating or overcoming current challenges.

This study examines the experiences of first-generation immigrant Latino parents while navigating the American special education system and the impact of these experiences on their participation in their children's special education process. We developed a conceptual framework to help interpret findings from previous studies identified during the literature review within this context. We then used this framework as the foundation for the data collection tool used in our inquiry and for our analysis of the collected data.

Conceptual Framework

At the beginning of this study, we made four basic assumptions based on our general understanding and practical experiences with parents of children with disabilities, Latino parents, and immigrant parents in general. First, most parents of children with disabilities share similar experiences related to having a child with special needs; these experiences are independent of—although sometimes intensified by—race, ethnicity, culture, religion, and socioeconomic or immigration status. Second, many Latino parents share similar experiences when interacting with personnel at U.S. schools regardless of their children's disability status, although demographic characteristics might modify these experiences. Third, immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities share similar experiences with non-immigrant and non-Latino parents of children with disabilities. Finally, immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities may have somewhat different experiences when navigating the special education system than non-immigrant and non-Latino immigrant parents.

Based on these assumptions, our review of the literature targeted publications that addressed three main topics: (a) experiences of parents of children with disabilities while participating in the special education process, (b) issues related to Latino parents' involvement in their children's education, and (c) Latino parents' experiences with the special education process. A three-ring Venn diagram was used to compare findings on the selected topics and to facilitate our understanding of the conditions that might influence immigrant Latino parents' participation in their children's special education process. We identified four overarching categories: parents' knowledge of the American education system, communication with their children's school, perception of school personnel, and perception of their own role in their children's education. Figure 1 illustrates the resulting conceptual framework for understanding the factors that influence immigrant Latino parents' participation in the special education process.

Knowledge of the Education System

Recent Latino immigrants (or immigrants who entered the US as adults) generally lack information about fundamental aspects of the U.S. education system and how American schools function (Antony-Newman, 2019; Zarate, 2007). Consequently, when the time comes to enroll their children in school, many immigrant Latinos must learn how American schools function from scratch: how and where to register their child, school schedules, routines and subjects, lunch fees, necessary supplies, uniform rules, vaccination requirements, holidays, offered services, homework expectations, the school year's approximate start and end dates, and more. Consistent with having limited knowledge of these basic aspects of the American education system, it might be expected that most immigrant parents would also have insufficient knowledge of U.S. school policies and federal education laws. Parents' insufficient knowledge of school expectations, procedures, and policies makes it difficult for them to know the behaviors and skills they should cultivate to increase their children's and family's school-based social capital (Yasuike, 2019; Hill & Taylor, 2004). This can cause parents to miss some of the implications that school personnel's decisions and actions may have for their children's education (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002; Bailey et al., 1999; Hill & Torres, 2010; Olivos, 2009).

For parents of children with disabilities, a crucial part of knowing the American education system is understanding the special education process, laws, and procedures. Parents who lack knowledge of special education laws typically feel less empowered and less confident when interacting with school professionals in regard to their children with disabilities (Burke et al., 2020). In comparison, understanding special education laws and procedures gives parents the tools they need to more actively participate in their children's education (Spann et al., 2003). For example, parents

who are knowledgeable about the special education process can analyze school professionals' actions and suggestions more objectively and can more quickly detect potential deviations from agreed-upon plans (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). As a result, they may feel more confident in their ability to contribute to their children's decision-making process and take a more active role during Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings (Fish, 2008).

Nevertheless, learning about special education laws and procedures can be an overwhelming task for parents. Even if schools dutifully offer parents written information about procedural safeguards and parental rights within the special education process, this information is typically written at a post-college level, which is not suitable for most parents (Mandic et al., 2012). Furthermore, Latino and non-Latino parents of children with disabilities have reported that professionals often tell them about what they need to know and then leave them to find the information on their own (Casillas et al., 2017). Immigrant Latinos' reduced knowledge of general features of the American education system can make it more challenging for them to access specific information about the special education process, laws, and procedures. Without knowing where to go for guidance, immigrant Latino parents may become frustrated and disempowered by their interactions with school personnel and their own inability to contribute to their children's educational decision-making process, as suggested by IDEA. For instance, in a study involving Latina mothers of children with autism spectrum disorders, Rios et al. (2020) found that only a few participants knew where to find information about special education despite believing that knowing more about the special education system would enable them to feel less stressed about participating in their children's IEP meetings. Immigrant Latino parents may need assistance accessing accurate information about what takes place at their children's school or what they need to know to support their children's academic progress (Wong-Villacres, 2019).

Parent-School Communication

Regular communication between parents and school professionals is an essential aspect of parental involvement in their children's education and is therefore very relevant to the academic success of children with disabilities. While communication is a two-way street, studies suggest that parents must be able to effectively convey what they know and share their concerns and suggestions regarding their children's educational program with educators and service providers before their children can benefit from any parent-school communication (Fish, 2006; Mueller et al., 2008). English- and non-English-speaking parents of children with disabilities have consistently reported facing tremendous challenges in communicating with schools due to school personnel's condescending attitudes, insufficient knowledge about how to teach children with disabilities, inconsistent attempts to communicate with parents about everyday incidents or essential aspects of their children's education, and unwillingness to consider parent input when making decisions about students' educational programming (Burke et al., 2021).

For immigrant Latinos, another factor that frequently hinders parent-school communication is language differences—specifically, parents' emerging English proficiency (Langdon, 2009; Salas, 2004). Latino parents of children with disabilities have often expressed a desire to maintain regular communication with their children's teachers and to collaborate with school personnel to support their children's learning and growth (Casillas et al., 2017). However, the failure of schools to provide information in Spanish to Latino parents with emerging English language skills perpetuates confusion about school procedures (Smith et al., 2008), blocking opportunities for these parents to voice their concerns or contribute to their children's educational decision-making process. In schools with no trained interpreters, bilingual staff (e.g., Spanish teachers, paraprofessionals) often function as “ad hoc interpreters” and are called to facilitate communication between parents and other school personnel as needed; however, the staff is rarely trained in official school procedures, instructional methods, or

special education processes (Colomer, 2010). Furthermore, parents may be forced to use their older children or other members of the family as interpreters (Orellana et al., 2003), despite them lacking the background knowledge and field-specific language skills needed to accurately interpret information about sensitive educational decisions and legal aspects of the special education process. In either case, inadequate interpretation services can create misunderstandings, further obstructing communication between immigrant Latino parents and school personnel (Cheatham, 2010). Finally, although Latino parents of children with disabilities assign great value to communication with school professionals (Casillas et al., 2017), ongoing financial stress and depression—among other challenges associated with the immigration process—may cause them to disengage from their children's academic activities (Gilbert et al., 2017). The roadblocks they face while attempting to learn about the American education system and special education regulations combined with the personal struggles that come with being an immigrant—especially during the first few years—may weaken some Latino parents' ability or willingness to communicate with school in the style or with the frequency educators might expect.

Perceptions of School Personnel

Parents' perceptions of school personnel are greatly influenced by their assessment of how school personnel treat children and their families and how well the services they offer to children with disabilities match parents' expectations (Hughes, et al., 2008; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010; Zionts et al., 2003). Among immigrant Latino parents, cultural beliefs and values may further shape their interpretations of educators' actions. Immigrant Latino parents' perceptions of school personnel's cultural competence, or lack thereof, might also influence their assessment of teachers' ability to understand and respect parents' expectations for their children (Harry, 1992; Hughes et al., 2008). In a study involving low-income Latinos, Miller et al. (2016) found that Spanish-dominant Latino parents have lower perceptions of American educators than non-Latino parents. This is likely related to previous findings suggesting that, when sensing disapproval of their cultural values, customs, and childrearing practices in teachers' comments and attitudes, immigrant Latino parents tend to develop a negative view of school and special education programs (Salas, 2004), which may make them less inclined to participate in the special education process. Likewise, immigrant Latino parents' understanding of American culture can shape how they interpret the decisions educators make for their children (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Trainor, 2010a).

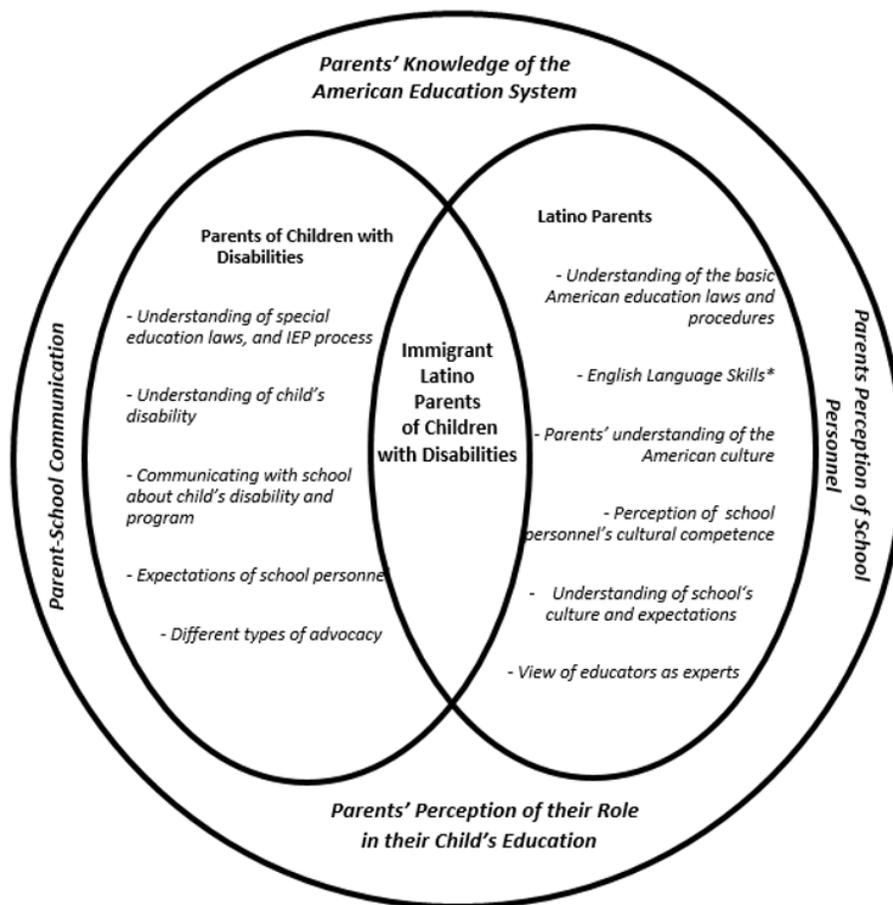
Perception of Their Role as Parents

Parents view their role in the education of their children with disabilities according to their general understanding of the expectations that the education system has of parent participation in the educational decision-making process as well as their own beliefs about what parent-school interactions should look like and their ideas about effective ways to advocate for their children (Trainor, 2010 a,b). Studies have identified some, presumably culturally based, attitudes and behaviors that are believed to shape Latino parents' perceptions of their role in their children's education. For instance, Latino parents' views of educators as experts (Hughes et al., 2008; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001) may lead them to adopt a more passive role in their children's education than expected within the American special education system. Latinos' tendency to view the role of parents as "advisors" who supervise the completion of homework and encourage children to work hard and be respectful and well-behaved (Smith et al., 2008) may seem insufficient to many American educators, who may interpret this position as a lack of commitment to their children's education. For new Latino immigrants transitioning into a new socio-cultural context, the differences in expectations for parental involvement and advocacy may become overwhelming for both parents and teachers (Zarate, 2007). Traditionally, studies have shown that Latino parents view their role as parents as being responsible for ensuring that their children are respectful, responsible, and committed to their education (Cohen,

2013). They may be confused by the expectation that they be an active participant and partner in (academically) educating their children. Although these findings might be interpreted as cultural traits, it is important to keep in mind that the definitions of Latinos used in most studies are rather limited (e.g., all participants came from the same country of origin or shared the same ethnicity, had the same educational socio-economic status, or lived in the same geographical area) and may not represent the cultural, linguistic, and social diversity actually found in this subgroup. Still, research suggests that an increasing awareness of philosophical differences and a growing disappointment with the American education system based on their own educational experiences before moving to the US (e.g., Leidy et al., 2010) may cause some immigrant Latino parents to struggle to comply with mainstream expectations of parental involvement.

Figure 1

Framework for Understanding the Factors that Influence Immigrant Latino Parent Participation in the Special Education Process



By integrating information about the experiences of non-Latino and Latino parents with the American education system and special education process, this conceptual framework explores how knowledge of the American education system (including understanding of the special education process), parents' perceptions of school personnel, parent-school communication, and parents' perceptions of their own role in their children's education might influence the participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process of their children with disabilities. Although the factors included in this conceptual framework emphasize family knowledge and actions, it is also

important to consider the role that educational organizations and educators play in facilitating or hindering parental participation in their children's education. Understanding how the aforementioned factors influence immigrant Latino parents' participation in their children's special education process is essential for schools to develop and implement the supports that immigrant Latino parents need to be more actively involved in the education of their children with disabilities.

Methods

This study examines how the factors discussed in the proposed conceptual framework influence immigrant Latino parents' participation in their children's special education process. To accomplish this, we sought to answer the following questions:

- What experiences do immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities (ages 3–12) have when navigating the special education system?
- How do these experiences influence immigrant Latino parents' participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities (ages 3–12)?

Instrumentation

To date, most studies that target immigrant Latino parents' interactions with U.S. schools have involved only a few participants and have followed qualitative research designs focused on reporting anecdotal experiences shared by parents. To advance our understanding of the relevance and generalizability of current knowledge about immigrant Latino parents' experiences, this study sought to obtain and analyze quantitative data from a larger number of participants from a more extensive geographic location (i.e., multiple cities and school districts across the chosen state). To do this, a survey exploring the potential factors identified in the literature review and included in the proposed conceptual framework was developed. Because only one researcher was bilingual and most parents and parent advocates with expertise in the special education process in the region are English monolinguals, we prepared the first set of survey items in English. We requested feedback about the relevance of each item before translating them to the Spanish language. Two English-speaking parents of children with disabilities reviewed the survey questions for clarity. Changes were then made in response to their feedback. Next, an expert panel consisting of eight professionals from special education and parent advocacy fields assessed the face validity and appropriateness of the survey items. A combination of the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970; Tyupa, 2011) with decentering and multiple forward translations was then used to generate the Spanish version of the survey. This process allowed for culturally relevant changes and a more accurate representation of the translated constructs. The survey items were translated from English to Spanish and back multiple times by five proficient bilingual speakers originating from different Latin American countries. The first author reviewed the survey for translation discrepancies until consensus on a final version of the survey was reached. A panel of bilingual English-Spanish educators, counselors, and parent advocates assessed the instrument for face validity and cultural appropriateness. A group of immigrant Latino parents also reviewed the Spanish version of the survey for clarity. Adjustments were then made in response to reviews of both versions of the instrument. None of the parents who assisted in the construction of the survey (i.e., revising, providing feedback) participated in the study.

Instrument Description

Eight survey items were designed to explore the frequency and quality of parental participation in the special education process: (1) I visit, call, or send notes about my child to the school; (2) I tell teachers when I have a concern about my child; (3) I ask teachers about school activities and events;

(4) I speak with teachers about my child's progress; (5) I attend my child's IEP meetings; (6) I tell teachers when I disagree with their decisions about programs and services for my child; and (7) the teachers and I make decisions together about what is best for my child, and (8) 8- at IEP meetings, I let the teachers make most of the decisions about my child's education. The remaining 25 items collected information about factors that potentially influenced participation (see Table 1 for survey items). All items provided four answer choices (0 = Never, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Frequently, 3 = Always). A demographic information section was attached to the survey to collect data about parents and their children with disabilities. Space was provided at the end of the survey for participants to add (optional) comments about to their experiences with the special education process to ensure that participants had the opportunity to communicate any information they deemed relevant to the study and to compensate for important factors that the researchers might have unintentionally excluded from the survey.

Instrument Reliability

A reliability analysis involving a single-administration method was conducted to measure the survey's internal consistency. Initially, the survey items were grouped into six conceptual categories. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to measure the internal consistency of the scales (sets of items) to measure the potential factors that influence immigrant Latino parents' participation in the special education process as identified in the conceptual framework. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .70 were used to determine the statistical significance of correlations. Items that significantly lowered the alpha coefficient for a scale were eliminated. A high Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicated a high level of consistency in the scale, while a low Cronbach's alpha coefficient indicated weak correlations among the items in the scale; that is, these items were unlikely to measure the same latent variable and therefore could not be treated as a *factor* in further statistical analysis. Cronbach's alpha levels for parents' participation in their children's special education process ($\alpha = 0.86$), parents' knowledge of the American education system ($\alpha = 0.85$), parents' perception of school personnel ($\alpha = 0.71$), and parents' English language communication skills ($\alpha = 0.84$) indicated a strong correlation among the items in each scale. These scales were treated as *factors* in the inferential statistical analysis. In contrast, *parent-school communication* ($\alpha = 0.44$) and *parents' perception of their own role in their child's education* ($\alpha = 0.15$) were not included in the inferential analysis due to low Cronbach's alpha coefficients, which suggested a weak correlation among the items included in these scales.

Participants

Selection criteria for participants in this study included Louisiana residents who (a) were born in Mexico, Central or South America, or Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries; (b) were raised in Spanish speaking families originating from the aforementioned regions; (c) spoke Spanish as their primary language at home and with close relatives or friends; and (d) were parents of children (ages 3–12) with disabilities receiving special education or related services under Part B of IDEA. This study was designed and conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, most interactions with agencies and participants occurred face-to-face to facilitate communication and help strengthen the researchers' relationship with the Latino community in the region.

We submitted information about the study to school districts, disability-related agencies, and community organizations across Louisiana. Collaborating gatekeepers distributed an invitation to participate in the study to self-identified Latino and Hispanic parents of children with disabilities (ages 3–12) in their databases. We also disseminated information about the study through Spanish-language media; specifically, flyers were posted at local clinics, English-as-a-second-language learning centers, Latino businesses, and churches in areas with relatively high concentration of Latinos in the state.

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We offered potential participants the choice to receive and return the survey via regular mail or to complete the survey during a face-to-face session with the first author or a trained bilingual staff member from the collaborating agency. Two weeks after mailing the surveys, we contacted participants to confirm that they had received the package, and we mailed written reminders to complete the survey four weeks after the first package was sent. As an incentive for participating in the study, we offered shopping cards for \$20.00 and made surveys available to parents in both English and Spanish. A possible reluctance to participate in the study due to issues related to immigration status was addressed by assuring parents that information regarding legal status would not be collected. Survey-reading assistance in Spanish and English was offered and provided upon request during face-to-face meetings.

Sample

A purposive sample of 50 immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities living in Louisiana was used in this study. Of the participants, 46 were female, and four were male. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 51 years ($M = 35.8$, $SD = 7.4$). Half of the participants ($n = 25$) were originally from Central America, 16 (32%) were from Mexico, four (8%) were from South America, and four (8%) were from Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries. This sample distribution resembled the demographics of country of origin reported for the Latino population in the state. Twelve (24%) participants had completed high school, 11 (22%) had some college education, and 11 (22%) had completed college or more. Of the remaining participants ($n = 16$; 32%), one had had no schooling, 10 had had up to six years of schooling, and four had completed middle school. The number of years that the participants had lived in the US ranged from four to 43 years ($M = 13.18$, $SD = 9.12$). Data regarding their children's free or reduced lunch status was requested, but more than half of the participants did not provide it. Income information was not requested to avoid generating distrust in potential participants, as some of the surveys were sent home through school district personnel who served as gatekeepers.

Of the participants' children with disabilities, 35 (70%) were male, and 15 (30%) were female. The ages of the children ranged from three to 12 years ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 1.67$). The average age of the participants' children at the time of placement in special education was 4.06 years. Fifteen children (30%) had speech and language disorders, 13 (26%) had autism spectrum disorders, and 22 (44%) had other disabilities (specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, another health impairment, multiple disabilities, a hearing impairment, a visual impairment, or a traumatic brain injury). Nine participants ($n = 9$) had more than one child diagnosed with a disability. Three of these nine participants completed the survey focused on their child with language and speech disorders; three ($n = 3$) participants focused on their child with autism, and the other three ($n = 3$) focused on their child with other disabilities. Thirty-eight (76%) participants reported that their children qualified for free or reduced school meals. The participants' children received special education services in 11 different public school systems, including the districts that provide services to the largest percentage of Latino students in the state.

Data Collection and Analysis

Of the 50 completed surveys, 39 were completed during face-to-face meetings, and 47 surveys were completed in Spanish. Sixteen ($n = 16$) participants wrote additional comments, and 19 participants verbally relayed specific experiences for the researcher to record. Survey data was entered anonymously in data collection sheets. The *Statistical Analysis System* (SAS; 9.2 version) was used to conduct the descriptive and inferential analyses of the survey data. The maximum missing number of responses per demographic variable was four, and the maximum number of missing responses per survey item was two. All missing data appeared to be random. Data was organized and analyzed

following the aforementioned conceptual framework for understanding the factors that influence immigrant Latino parents' participation in the special education process.

Frequency distributions were reported for all survey items. To answer our question regarding the experiences of immigrant Latino parents when participating in the special education process, we grouped the participants' answers into situations that they have experienced (Frequently/Always) and situations that they have not experienced (Never/Rarely). The numerical value attached to the responses was utilized to calculate means and standard deviations. A score of zero (0) was interpreted as the least desirable response, while a score of three (3) was interpreted as the most desirable response. For items regarding situations that were considered challenges, the scores were reversed to fit this interpretation pattern. Overall, measures of central tendency and variability were calculated for scales that showed adequate levels of internal consistency. Following procedures recommended by Creswell (2007), we segmented information collected in the *Comments* section and assigned it to emerging categories. Data was examined for contributing factors and contextual conditions that influenced the participants' responses to their experiences. We then grouped comments into thematic categories. Comments that did not fit under emergent themes were considered separately.

Inferential statistics were then used to examine the relationship between the parents' experiences and their participation in the special education process. An alpha level of .05 was used to determine statistical significance. To compensate for the relatively small sample size, we used adjusted squared regression coefficients (adjusted β) to determine the effect size (Ferguson, 2009). Two multiple regression models were developed. The first model measured how well parents' knowledge of the American education system, perception of school personnel, and English language communication skills predicted their participation in the special education process. The second regression expanded the first model by controlling for parents' level of education, number of years in the US, and children's disabilities.

We divided demographic variables into sub-categories: (a) parents' level of education (high school or less, at least some college), (b) parents' length of time living in the US (10 years or less, over 10 years), and (c) child's disability (autism, speech and language impairments, and other disabilities). Effect sizes for statistically significant relationships were then calculated.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the association between immigrant Latino parents' participation in the special education process and four items intended to represent presumed cultural experiences. Chi-square statistics were computed to test for associations between selected demographic variables and items found to have a statistically significant relationship with parental participation in the special education process. Due to the size of the sample, we divided participants into two groups: those who experienced the situation reflected in the items for all inferential tests (*frequently/always*) and those who did not (*never/rarely*). This allowed us to have a greater number of participants in each category, facilitating the statistical analysis.

Results

Findings from the data analysis were organized according to the specific research question they addressed.

Experiences of Immigrant Latino Parents When Navigating the Special Education System

On average, participants reported participating frequently and actively in their children's special education process ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 0.65$) and having a positive perception of school personnel working with their children ($M = 2.32$, $range = 1.00 - 3.00$). Participants believed they understood the American education system ($M = 2.13$, $range = 0.83 - 3.00$), including how schools function and other

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processes related to the education of their children with disabilities. However, half of the participants ($n = 25$) reported having emerging English language communication skills ($M = 1.56$, $SD = 1.10$, $range = 0-3$). Table 1 summarizes the data reported by the participants.

Table 1

Immigrant Latino Parents' Experiences while Navigating the Special Education System

	Never/ Rarely		Frequently/ Always	
	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Parents' knowledge of the American education system				
I understand how special education programs work.	13	26.00	37	74.00
I know about the special education services available to my child.*	15	30.61	34	68.86
I think I understand my child's disability.	8	16.00	42	84.00
I understand how American schools work.	18	36.73	31	62.69
I understand what I am supposed to do during IEP meetings.	8	16.00	42	84.00
Parent-school communication				
Somebody at school explains the information discussed at the IEP meeting in a way I can understand.	11	22.00	65	78.00
I have enough opportunities to communicate with my child's teachers between IEP meetings.	13	26.00	37	74.00
I receive invitations to visit my child's school for different events, not just IEP meetings.	11	22.00	39	78.00
Having so many professionals at the IEP meeting makes me uncomfortable.	47	94.00	3.0	6.00
I have problems understanding the information shared in the IEP meetings.	32	64.00	18	36.00
Parents' English language communication skills				
I speak with my child's teachers in English.	22	44.00	28	56.00
I use an interpreter to communicate with school staff during IEP meetings.	23	46.00	27	54.00
I feel uncomfortable asking questions because of my limited English.	26	52.00	124	48.00
Parents' perception of school personnel				
School personnel pay attention to my opinions about what my child needs.	9	18.00	41	82.00
School personnel have a positive attitude towards my child and my family.	5	10.00	45	90.00
I feel that the teachers speak down to me.	44	88.00	6.0	12.00
I trust all of the teachers working with my child.	4	8.00	46	92.00
The teachers and I expect the same things from my child.	5	10.00	45	90.00
The teachers understand my family's culture or lifestyle.*	24	48.97	25	50.41

The teachers give me suggestions about how I can help my child at home.	11	22.00	39	78.00
School personnel support my initiative to invite friends or relatives to my child's IEP meetings for additional support.	14	28.00	36	72.00

Parents' perception of their own role in their child's education

I believe that my child's teachers may think that I am interfering too much with their work with my child.**	37	77.09	11	22.67
I don't want teachers to think that I am being disrespectful.	36	72.00	14	28.00
I think that teachers know best about my child's needs.*	31	63.27	18	36.41
I find it difficult to confront school personnel about my child's educational needs.	37	74.00	13	26.00

Two major themes emerged from the comments section at the end of the survey. Participants' comments described either their favorable experiences with school professionals or the challenges they have faced while participating in their children's special education process. Most comments made by the participants referred to experiences not explicitly addressed in the survey. The participants (n = 10) described school professionals as helpful and expressed appreciation for the efforts that professionals have made to educate them about the special education process and include them in decision-making regarding their children's programming. Some participants (n = 4) specifically commented on teachers' pleasant personalities and loving attitudes towards their children.

Regarding challenges, some participants (n = 6) elaborated on how their inability to speak English has made it difficult for them to communicate with school personnel and help their children with schoolwork. A smaller number of participants (n = 4) reported having difficulties participating in school-related activities due to a lack of time or transportation issues. Other participants (n = 3) reiterated how their difficulty understanding their children's disabilities and IEP procedures has obstructed their participation in the special education process. Some participants (n = 8) complained about the poor understanding of disabilities exhibited by district administrators, principals, teachers, and service providers. Nine participants (n = 9) were dissatisfied with special educators' instructional skills and how special education programs are run. Some participants (n = 6) disagreed with instructional goals in the IEPs and felt that schools do not allow enough time for IEP meetings. A few participants (n = 3) discussed the challenges they have encountered during their children's evaluation and placement processes, while others (n = 3) commented on how their condition as immigrants has made it more difficult for them to participate in their children's special education process.

Influence of Experiences on Immigrant Latino Parents' Participation

In the first regression model, parents' knowledge of the education system, perception of school personnel, and English language communication skills explained about 33% of the variance in parental participation in the special education process ($R^2 = .327$, $F_{(3,42)} = 6.81$, $p < .001$). However, only English language communication skills ($b = .19$, $t = 2.19$, $p = .03$) significantly predicted parental participation in the special education process, showing a medium effect size ($F_{(1,42)} = 4.80$, adjusted $\beta = .11$). In other words, having stronger English language communication skills made parents more likely to participate in the special education process.

The second regression model ($R^2 = 0.57$, $F = 7.18$, $p < .001$) explained about 57% of the variance in parental participation in the special education process. Parents' knowledge of the American education system ($b = .35$, $t = 2.41$, $p = .02$) and their child's disability ($b = 0.7$, $t = 3.90$, $p < .001$) were

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the strongest predictors of parental participation in the special education process and accounted for 29% and 15% of the variance, respectively. Further analysis regarding the effect of the type of disability showed that, while holding *other disabilities* constant, the regression was significant for autism spectrum disorders ($b = .70, t = 3.90, p < .001$). In other words, parents who reported having a child with autism were more likely to participate in the special education process. In comparison, having a child with speech and language impairments ($bi = -.05, t = -.27, p = .79$) resulted in a lower parent participation score than having a child with other disabilities. However, no significant statistical differences were found in the participation of parents in these two groups. Small effect sizes for the perception of school personnel ($b = 0.35, t = 2.25, p = 0.03$; adjusted $\beta = .07, F_{(1,38)} = 5.07, p = 0.03$) and English language communication skills ($b = .20, t = .2.06, p = .04$; adjusted $\beta = .05, F_{(1,38)} = 3.59, p = .06$) showed weak relationships between these variables and parental participation in the special education process. Despite being statistically significant, these two variables may not have significantly influenced parental participation in a practical sense. A positive ($b = .25, t = 1.55$) but not statistically significant relationship was identified between parents' participation in the special education process and the number of years they have lived in the US (adjusted $\beta = .04, F_{(1, 38)} = 2.42, p = .13$). Parents' level of education (adjusted $\beta = .12, F_{(1, 38)} = 8.45, p = .27$) contributed to only 1.2% of the variance in this regression and did not predict parental participation in the special education process (Table 2).

Table 2

Influence of Latino Parents' Experiences and Demographic Variables on Parent Participation in the Special Education Process – Test Results by Predictor

Predictor	<i>df</i>	<i>Type III SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Adjusted β</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Regression Model 1									
Parents' knowledge of the education system	1	1.29	1.29	0.33	0.16	0.10	4.02	2.01	0.051
Parents' English language communication skills	1	1.54	1.54	0.19	0.08	0.11	4.80	2.19	0.03*
Parents' perception of school personnel	1	0.65	0.66	0.24	0.16	0.05	2.05	1.43	0.16
Regression Model 2									
Parent's level of education	1	1.92	1.92	1.91		0.12	8.45		0.27
Parents' time in the US	1	0.55	0.55	0.55		0.04	2.42		0.13
Child's disability	2	2.42	1.21	1.21		0.15	5.32		< 0.01*
Parents' knowledge of the education system	1	4.56	4.56	4.56		0.29	20.08	2.41	0.02*
Parents' English language communication skills	1	0.82	0.82	0.82		0.05	3.59	2.06	0.05*

Parents' perception of school personnel	1	1.15	1.15	1.15	0.07	5.07	2.25	0.03*
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An ANOVA ($F_{(1,48)} = 4.15, p = .05$) indicated a lower parental participation mean score for parents who had difficulty confronting school personnel about their children's needs ($m = 1.96, sd = .80$) compared to those who did not have this difficulty ($m = 2.37, sd = .57$). Conversely, the presumably culturally based attitudes and behaviors considered in our conceptual framework, such as worrying that teachers think parents were interfering too much in their work ($F_{(1,46)} = 2.35, p = .13$), being concerned about appearing disrespectful to teachers ($F_{(1,48)} = .69, p = .41$), and believing that teachers understand their children's needs better than parents ($F_{(1,47)} = .12, p = .73$), did not affect parental participation in their children's special education process. Results from the chi-square test of independence suggest that participants were equally likely to have difficulty confronting school personnel about their children's educational needs regardless of their level of education ($X^2(1, N = 50) = 1.25, p = .26$), time living in the US ($X^2(1, N = 49) = .48, p = .49$), or their child's disability type ($X^2(2, N = 50) = 1.15, p = .56$).

Discussion

Contrary to previous research showing low levels of parental involvement among the Latino population (Tinkler, 2002), outcomes from this study showed that most participants frequently engaged in activities related to their children's special education process. Parents of children with disabilities require increased support and a clear expectation of their participation in their children's education. Their unique circumstances may motivate immigrant parents of children with disabilities to seek information and learn about the education system, and this may lead to greater confidence and elicit more active engagement in their children's education. Therefore, the results from this study cannot be compared to earlier findings regarding parental involvement among the general Latino population.

The conceptual framework developed for this study included four overarching factors that influence immigrant Latino parents' participation in their children's special education process: parents' knowledge of the American education system, parents' perception of school personnel, parent-school communication, and parents' perception of their own role in their children's education. Consistent with the framework, this study found immigrant Latino parents' knowledge of the American education system to be a strong predictor of their participation in the special education process. Participants reported knowing about the American educational system and understanding information shared during IEP meetings. These findings were somewhat unexpected, as one-third of the participants admitted to often struggling to understand the information received at these meetings. Factors such as knowing general education protocols, understanding special education practices and procedures, and awareness of services available to children with disabilities seemed to empower participants to take on a more active role in their children's special education process and to act as decision-making advocates for their children. This outcome supports findings from earlier studies, which have suggested a connection between Latino parents' knowledge of educational services and their participation in special education decision-making (Bailey et al., 1999).

The second factor identified in our conceptual framework was parent-school communication. Previous studies have suggested that emerging English proficiency may restrict parents' access to information about the American education system (Langdon, 2009) and reduce networking opportunities with school personnel and disability-related agencies, both of which are essential for parents to learn about programs and services available to their children. Approximately half of the

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parents participating in this study needed interpreting assistance during IEP meetings. Native English-speaking, non-Latino, and non-immigrant parents have also reported being confused during IEP meetings. Coming from immigrant parents, these findings are especially problematic because parents' ability or inability to communicate in English can shape the quality of their participation in their children's special education process. Participants' difficulty understanding information shared during meetings and when participating in the decision-making process may have resulted from poor-quality interpreting services (Cheatham, 2010). This explanation seems particularly likely for participants whose children attend school systems with small Latino populations where interpreting services are scarce and limited access to qualified personnel forces districts to rely on untrained interpreters with minimal understanding of the special education process and terminology.

Almost half of the participants were uncomfortable asking questions about their children's performance or the special education process due to their emerging English skills. Parents' sense of self-efficacy is associated with their ability to communicate with school personnel (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). When participation is expected to involve mastery of the English language and a knowledge of the special education system—which they may not possess—immigrant Latino parents may find it difficult to effectively communicate with educators, thus generating feelings of incompetence and discouraging them from participating in their children's special education process. Notably, while the outcomes of this study confirm the role of English language skills in immigrant Latino parents' participation in the special education process, the effect size for this variable was smaller than expected. Some of the participants' comments reiterated the challenges created by their emerging English skills (e.g., communicating with school personnel and helping their children with homework). However, the information shared was practical in nature and did not elaborate on the social-emotional repercussions these challenges have had on them as individuals or whether these challenges have affected their sense of identity. Unlike previous generations of linguistically diverse parents studied in educational research, today's immigrants have more options for accessing information or communicating with school personnel. Immigrant Latino parents often use platforms such as WhatsApp, Google translate, and YouTube to communicate with friends and family, complete daily routines, find information of interest, and even coordinate and communicate about their children's health care needs with professionals (Silverman-Lloyd et al., 2020; Wong-Villacres et al., 2019). The increasing accessibility of similar, relatively inexpensive technology may empower today's immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities to inform themselves about the special education process, thus helping them participate in their children's education more frequently and actively than their predecessors. The participants' relatively higher educational levels might also make it easier for them to use technology to compensate for their emerging English skills.

Perception of school personnel was found to be a significant predictor of parental participation in the special education process. Nevertheless, the small effect size suggests that it may not be as strong a motivator as other factors explored in this study. Despite almost half of the participants believing that teachers do not understand their families' cultures and lifestyles, most parents had a favorable perception of school personnel. They trusted their children's teachers, considered school personnel to be supportive of their children and families, believed that teachers share their expectations for their children, and believed that school personnel listen to their opinions about their children. Some participants even emphasized teachers' positive attitudes toward their children and attempts to help parents feel comfortable with the special education process. Collectively, these findings challenge the belief among some educators regarding the unarguable need to know the culture and native language of diverse families to develop partnerships with them. They suggest that immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities may not always view educators' cultural competence as an indispensable requirement for collaboration. Instead, attitudes towards children and families may have a greater impact on parents' perceptions of school personnel. This supposition

follows results from earlier studies in which (non-Latino) parents identified teachers' attitudes as critical factors in their assessments of the quality of special education programs (Fish, 2008).

While most studies exploring Latino parents' perceptions of special educators have been conducted in regions with a high concentration of Latinos (e.g., Marschall, 2006; Ramirez, 2003; Shah, 2009), Latinos constitute less than 5% of the student population in Louisiana. Participants may not have expected educators to know about their native culture and may have developed compensatory strategies. Moreover, earlier studies of Latino parents of children with disabilities often used much smaller samples than the one used in the current study, which could account for some differences in their results.

The final factor considered in our conceptual framework was parents' perception of their own role in their children's education. For this study, we created survey items that explored cultural values presumed to hinder the participation of Latino parents in the special education process. Notably, most participants disagreed with the statement regarding teachers knowing best about their children's needs. They denied being concerned about appearing disrespectful or the possibility of teachers thinking that they (parents) interfered too much in their work with their children. These responses contradict earlier suggestions of a tendency among Latinos to look up to special education professionals as "experts" (Hughes et al., 2008) and to defer to school professionals, thus limiting their participation in making decisions about their children's education (Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001). Even for the minority of participants who agreed with one or more of these statements, these presumably culturally based experiences did not appear to make a significant difference in their participation in the special education process. Instead, this finding is more consistent with recent studies that have described how some Latino parents have learned to successfully navigate the special education system and have intentionally developed strategies to participate more actively in their children's special education process (Angell & Solomon, 2017; Kervick, 2017; Poza et al., 2014)

The unique characteristics of the sample used in this study may assist in explaining these discrepancies. Because 44% of participants had at least some college education, one might conclude that having a higher level of education may have caused this group of immigrant Latino parents to feel more self-confident and be more assertive in their dealings with educators despite remnants of contradicting cultural beliefs. Furthermore, the overrepresentation of parents of children with autism in the sample may have introduced an additional bias, skewing the data and causing *having a child with autism* to appear as a strong predictor of parental participation in the special education process. Additionally, the effect of children's disabilities on parental participation in the special education process is likely to be unrelated to the diversity issues often emphasized in research on multicultural education. Many of the disability-related challenges experienced by immigrant Latino parents have also been experienced by non-immigrant and non-Latino parents of children receiving special education services in the US (Burke et al., 2021). Therefore, it appears sensible to say that the participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process is influenced by many factors, some of which transcend cultural and linguistic differences and immigration status.

Finally, the length of time immigrants have lived in their host country is associated with the acculturation and language acquisition processes (Leidy et al., 2010), both of which may affect all four factors included in our conceptual framework. The unexpected non-significant relationship between the length of time living in the US and parental participation in the special education process identified in this study might, in part, be explained by the fact that most participants had lived in the country for a relatively long time.

Like parents from other cultural or linguistic groups, immigrant Latino parents' perceptions and actions regarding their children's education are likely to be influenced by many variables that go beyond the traits that most non-immigrant and non-Latino American educators might first notice when interacting with these parents. To facilitate immigrant Latino parents' participation in the special

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education process of their children with disabilities, educators must remain open-minded and regularly reassess their ideas about Latinos in the US. Additionally, researchers can help to eliminate stereotypes about immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities by designing studies that look beyond the obvious and consider additional variables (e.g., level of education, time in the US, country of origin, child's disability, family composition) that might influence immigrant Latino parents' behaviors and experiences with the special education process.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, a random sample could not be selected due to the nature of the population. Additional limitations included the use of a newly created survey and the potential biases involved in developing a bilingual instrument. Additionally, all participants lived in a single state with a small Latino population. Because not all subgroups of Latinos were present within this population, the experiences of the parents in this sample may not represent those of immigrant Latino parents whose children with disabilities receive special education services in other areas of the country.

Another limitation is that only three disability categories (speech and language impairment, autism, and other disabilities) could be drawn from the sample. Studies including larger samples are needed to further examine the effects of the explored factors on the participation of parents of children with disabilities included in the "other disabilities" group. Additionally, the combination of responses into binomial categories in the inferential tests to facilitate the statistical analysis of the data might have introduced some bias in the data and reduced our understanding of participants' true experiences.

A third limitation of this study is that all participants had children who attended traditional public schools; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities who attend charter or private schools. Likewise, the fact that recruitment focused on parents of children who were already receiving special education services left out the voices of parents who had been unsuccessful in securing a special education evaluation for their children with diagnosed disabilities or parents whose children had participated in the special education process (e.g., special education evaluation) but had not qualified for services. Adding these parents to the sample would likely modify our findings. Finally, the survey did not collect information about family composition; we did not consider factors such as single-parent status and did not differentiate parents from legal guardians.

Conclusion

The participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process of their children with disabilities is influenced by the type of disability their children have and by the parents' knowledge of the American education system, their perception of school personnel, their ability to communicate in English, and their ability to confront educators about their children's needs. Further studies using samples representative of immigrant Latinos across the US are needed to continue exploring the effects of Latino parents' level of education and length of time in the US on their participation in their children's educational decision-making process.

To continue to advance our understanding of this topic, comparative studies must be conducted to examine the effects of the factors identified during this investigation on the participation of parents from different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds in their children's special education process. Meanwhile, schools could ease the restrictions on parental participation by hiring

more bilingual and bicultural qualified staff and by searching for alternative ways to support communication with immigrant Latino families. Schools must develop plans to systematically educate immigrant Latino parents on the American education system—in general—and on the national, state, and local laws and procedures pertaining to special education. Most importantly, educators must dismiss stereotypical ideas regarding Latino parents' lack of involvement in their children's education and realize that many immigrant Latino parents are eager and able to participate in their children's special education process despite cultural, linguistic, and immigration-related challenges.

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