Factors that Influence the Participation of Immigrant Latino Parents in the Special Education Process of their Children with Disabilities

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Factors that Influence the Participation of Immigrant Latino Parents in the Special Education Process of their Children with Disabilities

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education Early Intervention

by

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December, 2012
Dedication

I dedicate this work to the families that participated in this study. Your stories of unconditional love and courage have enriched my personal and professional life more than you will ever know. May your determination to get what your children need and your resilience be an inspiration for all who read this dissertation.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my beloved husband, Fernando. Moni, thank you for being part of this adventure with me, for encouraging me to fulfill my potential, and for always thinking that I am smarter than I really am ☺️. Although your unwavering confidence in my talents can be stressful at times, it is an amazing compliment because it comes from the brightest man I know. You are the love of my life, and your support means everything to me.
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Abstract

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act emphasized the importance of parents’ participation in all educational decisions concerning their children with disabilities. However, parents’ ability to actively participate in, and contribute to, their children’s special education process is influenced by a variety of parent and school related factors. For immigrant Latino parents, these factors may include additional issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity not experienced by most parents. This study examined the experiences of immigrant Latino parents when navigating the special education system as well as the impact that such experiences had on parents’ participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities. A researcher-developed survey (Special Education Parent Participation Survey, SPED-PPS) was used to collect the data. Findings indicated that, although about half of the participants were unable to communicate in English with educators, parents still communicated and collaborated often with school personnel. In addition, most immigrant Latino parents trusted professionals working with their children and had a positive perception of school personnel. A minority of parents believed that teachers knew best about their children’s needs, believed that teachers thought that parents interfered too much in their work, and/or felt uncomfortable with having many professionals in the Individual Educational Plan meetings. Immigrant Latino parents’ participation in their children’s special education process appeared to be influenced by the child’s disability as well as parents’ knowledge of the American education system, perception of school personnel, English language communication skills, and ability to confront school personnel about the child’s needs.

Latino parents, immigrant parents, parents’ experiences, children with disabilities, special education process, parent participation
CHAPTER I
Introduction

Cultural and linguistic diversity refers to differences in cultural identity and/or native language exhibited by members of specific ethnic and/or racial minority groups, which vary from those favored by mainstream European-American society. In the last couple of decades, cultural and linguistic diversity has become a common theme among educators in the United States due to the rapid increase in the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students attending American schools. For example, in 1990, one in twenty public school students was an English Language Learner (ELL). Today, that number has increased to one in nine students (KewalRamani, Gilberson, Fox & Provasnik, 2007). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2003), it is estimated that by the year 2030, 40% of students attending K-12 American schools will speak English as a second language, with approximately 80 percent of them being Latinos.

Generally, individuals of Latino descent are also referred to in the literature as *Hispanics*. This population includes foreign and American citizens who are born and raised in Spanish-speaking families originating from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Central and South America, and Caribbean countries (e.g., Cuba, Dominican Republic). Latinos have become the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, comprising 16% of the nation’s population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, U.S. Department of Education, 2008). By 2015, 21% percent of the American population is expected to be of Latino descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).

Such predictions generate concern among many educators since data indicate that English language learners (ELLs), especially Latinos, are at a higher risk of academic failure. For example, statistics show that out of each 100 Latino students (who constitute the majority of
ELLs attending American public schools) entering the American education system at the elementary school level, only 50 of them complete high school compared to about 80% of their White counterparts (Hurtado, Cervantez, & Eccleston, 2010). These statistics are often attributed not only to ELLs’ lack of language proficiency and limited educational experiences in their countries of origin but also to factors such as parents’ low socio-economic and educational levels (Abedi, 2004; Jimenez, 2004; Ruiz de Velasco & Fix, 2002), which are common among many immigrants in America (Hernandez, Denton, & Blanchard, 2011). Furthermore, research shows that Latino parents have lower levels of parental involvement in their children’s education than White parents (Tinkler, 2002; Turney & Kao, 2009), which is thought to contribute to poor academic achievement and disproportionate placement in special education among Latino students.

**Parental Involvement and Student Achievement**

Parental involvement has been defined as parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children (Jeynes, 2007). It comprises a variety of parental actions such as childrearing practices, communication with school personnel, and parent support of the student’s learning (Eccles & Harold, 1996 as cited by Trainor, 2010). Parental involvement has been considered an important aspect of student achievement for several decades (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 1994, 1997, 2009). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) have suggested that parental involvement influences student achievement through the modeling, reinforcement, and instruction of desired school-related skills and behaviors. In addition, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler stated that parents’ decision to become involved depends on parents’ view of their role
in their children’s education, parents’ sense of self-efficacy in helping their children succeed in school, and parents’ opportunities or demands for participation.

Hill and Taylor (2004) explained the impact of parental involvement in student achievement in terms of capital. They stated that parental involvement positively impacts student achievement by increasing social capital (parents’ social skills, connections, and networks) and social control (the result of parents’ collaboration with schools to create social constraints to regulate their children’s behaviors). According to the authors, parents’ interactions with school personnel allow parents to learn important information about school expectations that they can use to prepare and support their children in their academic endeavors. For example, parents may use information gathered during communications with teachers to better assist their children with homework or test preparation. Similarly, parents can increase social control over their children by collaborating with educators and other parents to develop expectations about acceptable behaviors. These expectations can then be communicated by both school personnel and the child’s family. This description of the relationship between parental involvement and student achievement is in line with previous research findings suggesting that children whose parents are highly involved in their education possess greater levels of social capital related to high parental expectations and the types of activities in which their parents participate (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Parental involvement, in the form of parental communication of educational expectations, elicits an increase in students’ educational aspiration, which in turn manifests as higher student academic achievement (Hong & Ho, 2005). This positive impact of parental involvement in student academic achievement is consistent among students from all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Jeynes, 2005, 2007). In a longitudinal study following
179 individuals from low-income families from birth to age 23, Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) found that parental involvement was the main differentiating factor between students who graduated from high school and those who did not among participants that were not expected to graduate based on academic achievement scores, behavior measures, and teachers’ impressions.

Parental involvement in school activities tends to be higher at the elementary school level, decreasing as students move on to middle and high school (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Research has indicated a stable and significant positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement among elementary level urban students regardless of gender, socio-economic status, or nature of the involvement (Jeynes, 2005). Similarly, despite a slight decrease in the impact of parental involvement in older students’ academic achievement, parental participation continues to have a significantly positive effect in student performance at the secondary level across different populations of students, including those from minority and culturally diverse groups (Jeynes, 2007). This effect appears to be more distinctive when parental involvement is spontaneous and voluntary, but it remains significant among students whose parents become involved as a result of school-directed parent programs, or programs implemented by schools to encourage and facilitate parental involvement (Jeynes, 2005, 2007).

These findings confirm that efforts to promote school-parent partnerships may indeed influence student academic outcomes, which is particularly relevant for schools seeking to improve student performance.

In regards to the types of parental involvement that seem to be most effective in promoting academic achievement, research has indicated that the presence of parental expectations and a parental style that communicates the value of education has a stronger impact on student achievement than particular actions such as attending school functions and helping
with homework (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Stewart, 2008). In other words, contrary to what many educators may intuitively think, the more subtle facets of parental involvement (e.g., expectations and values) have a greater influence in student performance than more tangible ways of parental participation in their children’s education (e.g., attending school functions). In fact, parental involvement that promotes children’s understanding of the goal of education and that provides effective academic socialization strategies (e.g., facilitating the student’s understanding of the school’s procedures and expectations, discussing learning strategies with the child, promoting educational and occupational aspirations) seems to have the strongest influence on academic achievement.

Degrees of parental involvement vary among individuals from different socio-economic status and ethnicity (Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls, & Nero, 2010; Turney & Kao, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 1996, 2009; Viramontez-Anguiano, 2004). Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort created by the National Center for Education Statistics have shown that poor parents (especially those who also have a low educational level) are less involved than nonpoor parents in their children’s education during kindergarten (Cooper, 2010). Also, parents from ethnic minority groups demonstrate lower levels of parental involvement (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2009). This may be related to the fact that many families from low socio-economic status and culturally diverse backgrounds lack the educational experiences required to provide their children with the socialization skills that they need to succeed in school.

Epstein (2005) stated that the sociological principles behind the expectation of parental involvement included in the No Child Left Behind Act emphasize the need to view parental involvement as a component of school and classroom organization that recognizes educators’
and families’ shared responsibility for children’s academic success; encourages the participation of all parents; and requires strong leadership at all levels, including teachers, administrators, and parents. Therefore, school-directed parent support programs for culturally and linguistically diverse parents should be designed to accommodate the issues that make the greatest impact on students’ achievement. By facilitating parents’ understanding of the skills that can positively influence student achievement, schools can help all parents become more effectively involved in the education of their children. This is particularly important when dealing with culturally diverse families or families of students with disabilities.

**Parental Involvement in Special Education**

Special education laws have emphasized the importance of parental participation in the education of their children with disabilities. In fact, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA, 1997) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004) clearly identify the role of parents as active participants in the decision-making process of their children’s education (Fish, 2008; Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). However, evidence suggests that parents may face significant challenges while navigating the special education system and advocating for appropriate instruction and services for their children (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). This difficulty participating in the special education process is likely to have negative consequences in the academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

**Parental Involvement and the Achievement of Students with Disabilities**

Although data on the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement of students with disabilities have not been comprehensively and systematically collected and analyzed to this date (Trainor, 2010a), studies have indicated a positive and
significant correlation between parental involvement and school success among the general student population (Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Miedel & Reynolds, 1990). Emerging research in the area of special education suggests a positive relationship between parental involvement and the academic achievement of students with disabilities, especially when this effect is evaluated longitudinally (McDonnell, Cavenaugh, & Giesen, 2010).

These findings may reflect an association between parental involvement and the increased likelihood of students with disabilities receiving appropriate special education and/or related services (Trainor, 2010b). Appropriate services, in turn, may positively impact students’ ability to benefit from instruction. In addition, students with disabilities may require significant assistance and encouragement at school and home to succeed academically and socially, making the effect of parental involvement more obvious. Similarly, for the students with limited communication skills and those who are unable to advocate for themselves due to their disabilities, parental involvement might be crucial in helping school personnel understand the children’s strengths and weaknesses and develop appropriate educational plans.

**Parental Participation in the Special Education Process**

Research studies have suggested that parental participation in the special education process is influenced by multiple parent and school related factors, including parents’ and school personnel’s knowledge of the special education laws and procedures (Fish, 2008; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010), parent-school communication (Zions, Zions, Harrison, & Bellinger, 2003), and parental satisfaction with their children’s special education programs and services (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003).

Parents’ perceptions and understanding of special education laws and procedures have been established as one of the most relevant factors that impact parental participation in the
special education process (Spann et al., 2003). Parents’ understanding of the special education system enables them to take on a more active role during Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings (Fish, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). In addition, active involvement in the IEP process may potentially translate into increased overall involvement in their children’s education. As a matter of fact, parents’ and school administrators’ knowledge of the special education law and procedures has been proposed as a fundamental factor in preventing parent-school conflict in special education (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

However, understanding special education laws and procedures may be difficult for many parents. Although IDEA requires that schools distribute procedural safeguards to parents of children with disabilities, the language used in these documents is usually too technical and complicated for most parents to understand. Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, and Acevedo-Garcia (2010) found that the average reading level of the procedural safeguards documents provided by the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia in 2006 was equivalent to a 16th grade or post-college reading level. Using national reading and educational attainment data (National Assessment of Adult Literacy- NAAL, the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study- SEELS, and the National Longitudinal Transition Study- NLTS2) to estimate the reading level of adults in the age range representing parents of students with disabilities, Mandic et al. determined that most parents of children with disabilities had a reading level much lower (high school or less) than what was required to comprehend the procedural safeguards distributed by schools. As a result, it would be extremely difficult for most parents to read the information presented in the special education procedural safeguards and actually comprehend the implications that special education laws have for them and their children.
Another aspect of parent-school interaction that may affect parents’ participation in the special education process is the degree of parental satisfaction with their children’s schools and programs. Studies have indicated that parents of children with disabilities often attribute their levels of satisfaction with their children’s school and instructional programming to the schools’ welcoming atmosphere, teachers’ respectful attitudes towards their families, and teachers’ encouragement of parental participation in educational decisions (Fish, 2008). At the same time, parents’ perception of educators’ disapproval or misunderstanding of their cultural values, customs, and practices negatively influence their perception of their children’s special education programs and their level of satisfaction with the services provided by schools. Such reactions could in turn affect the overall quality of their participation in the education of their children with disabilities.

In summary, parental involvement is a critical factor in children’s education and achievement. In the case of students with disabilities, parental participation in the special education process is not only a parental right but an essential part of parental involvement. Parental participation in the special education process is crucial in order to provide adequate services for students with disabilities. This includes conducting nondiscriminatory evaluations and avoiding the disproportionate representation of racially or culturally diverse groups in special education.

**Disproportionality in Special Education**

Since the 1970s, consistent disproportionate numbers of students from culturally and linguistically diverse groups have been prevalent in some areas of special education (Artiles, Trent & Palmer, 2004). In particular, overrepresentation of African American and Latino students in disability categories such as mental retardation has been reported (National Research
Council, 1982). In the low incidence disability category (visual and/or hearing impairment, significant cognitive disabilities, and multiple disabilities), research later showed no evidence of systematic overrepresentation of any one particular racial or ethnic group (National Research Council, 2002).

However, once the general data provided by schools are disaggregated by grade level, many urban school districts still exhibit a disproportionality trend of ELLs in special education. This trend includes under and overrepresentation of these students in the high incidence disability categories (e.g., speech and language disorders, learning disabilities, mild developmental or cognitive disabilities) at different points in the elementary-to-high school years (Conger, Schwartz, & Stiefel, 2007; Levinson et al., 2007). For example, researchers found that, compared to White and English language proficient peers, ELLs were often underrepresented in special education at the elementary level but considerably overrepresented at the secondary level (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). This phenomenon could be attributed to schools’ attempt to give ELLs ample time to learn English before referring them for evaluation, school personnel’s lack of appropriate training and experience in working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and schools’ use of inadequate assessment methods and instruments (Cofresi & Gorman, 2004).

Regardless of the cause, these patterns of under and overrepresentation of ELLs in special education programs constitute a challenge for the American education system. For that reason, researchers in the fields of bilingual education, English as a Second Language (ESL), and special education have insisted on the importance of conducting appropriate assessments and providing adequate instruction to avoid erroneous referrals and diagnoses that could lead to
disproportionality of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education (Klinger & Harry, 2006; Wilkinson, Ortiz, Robertson, & Kushner, 2006).

For decades, IDEA has required schools to perform non-discriminatory evaluations of ELLs suspected of having a disability, which includes the use of culturally and ethnically non-biased assessment tools and procedures (Trainor, 2010a). However, to accomplish the goal of accurately assessing ELLs’ educational needs, school staff need to be trained in culturally and linguistically appropriate educational practices. Parents are the most consistent source of information about the students’ cultural, linguistic, developmental, and educational history, all of which are considered essential components of a non-discriminatory evaluation for special education (Cofresi & Gorman, 2004). The absence of parental participation during the initial stages of the special education process makes it difficult for school professionals to understand the student’s development within its cultural context and to determine whether his behavior is the result of the child’s cultural and linguistic differences or developmental delays (Guiberson, 2009). Therefore, schools must promote the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse parents in the special education process in order to increase the accuracy of the special education evaluation process and avoid the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education. This is particularly important since research supports the idea that parental participation improves academic outcomes for all students, including those who come from families with different racial, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 1994, 1997).
Involvement of Culturally Diverse Parents

Improving levels of parental involvement among culturally and linguistically diverse families might not always be easy schools. Differences in role conceptualization and expectations may exist as a byproduct of diversity. Culturally and linguistically diverse families, including Latino families, may practice different parenting styles and hold different beliefs about child development and disability (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Kozleski et al., 2008; Langdon, 2009). Their culture and experiences may shape their perception of the special education system as well as the manner in which they interact with school personnel and respond to institutional regulations and expectations (Harry, 2002). For instance, the IDEA expectation for parents to act as active participants in the special education process may not resonate with some culturally and linguistically diverse families (Trainor, 2010a). These variations in the educational priorities set by schools and parents may have a negative effect on the ability of culturally diverse parents to participate in all aspects of their children’s education, as stated in the special education mandates.

Parents’ perceptions of the special education process appear to be affected by their ability to communicate and collaborate with school personnel (Spann et al., 2003) and their assessment of the quality of the services provided to their children (Fish, 2008). These perceptions are likely influenced by parents’ communication skills and competency in their own as well as the mainstream culture (Bailey, Skinner, Rodriguez, Gut, & Correa, 1999; Hughes, Valle-Riestra, Arguelles, 2008; Olmsted, et al., 2010). Similarly, school personnel’s attitudes and understanding of cultural and linguistic differences impact their ability to communicate and collaborate with parents (Langdon, 2009; Olivos, 2009). Therefore, educators also must improve their understanding of how cultural and linguistic differences may manifest in students’
behaviors and learning processes. In addition, school personnel need to learn effective ways of communicating and collaborating with diverse families in order to increase participation in the special education process among parents from all cultural backgrounds, including Latinos.

**Parental Involvement among Latinos**

Parental participation has been found to positively influence academic performance among Latino students (Kupermic, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008; Marschall, 2006). However, Latinos continue to show low levels of parental involvement in their children’s education, which may be one possible explanation for the low academic achievement rates within this population (Tinkler, 2002). For that reason, scholars have emphasized the need to increase parental involvement as one means to address the poor educational outcomes of Latino students (Langdon, 2009; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010; Salas, Lopez, Chinn, & Menchaca-Lopez, 2005).

Researchers have suggested that the low levels of parental involvement reported among Latinos is the result of the cultural inappropriateness of the definitions of parental involvement utilized in most research studies (Hill & Torres, 2010; Orozco, 2008; Ryan et al., 2010). Current definitions may conflict with Latino parents’ concept of parental participation in and support of their children’s education (Huerta & Brittain, 2010). For example, although Latino parents are reported to place a greater value on educational success (over social success) than European-American parents, their concept of parental involvement often includes greater participation of other family members and close friends in the education of their children (Blue-Banning, Turnbull, & Pereira, 2000; Ryan et al., 2010). Such a concept of parental involvement differs significantly from the stricter meaning of *parental* involvement held by schools, which usually refers to the child’s main guardians.
Latino parents tend to view their role in their children’s education as one of advisor who supervises the completion of homework, motivates children to work hard, and teaches children to be respectful and behave appropriately (Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008). This culturally influenced concept of parental involvement is likely to appear insufficient compared to the expectations held by most American schools. Nevertheless, research suggests that parental communication (as opposed to parental educational aspiration for their children and parental participation in school-related activities) may indeed be the only effective parental involvement factor to have a significant impact on Latino students’ academic achievement (Hong & Ho, 2005), which validates Latino parents’ cultural practice of less overt ways to exhibit parental involvement.

An additional barrier to Latino parental involvement in school-related activities is the confusion that Latino parents experience regarding basic school procedures due to their limited English language skills and schools’ failure to deliver important information in Spanish (Smith et al., 2008). Latino parental involvement is positively associated with teacher cultural awareness and school efforts to involve parents in school-related activities, both of which tend to improve as Latinos gain greater representation in local school councils (Marschall, 2006). In fact, research has stressed the value of having Latino representation at school to increase Latino parental involvement in school-related activities. Latino parents are more likely to participate in their children’s education when they see “others like themselves” in leadership positions, especially if such representation occurs in the form of a teacher (Shah, 2009).

Although not surprising, this information creates concern due to the disproportionally small number of Latino educators currently teaching at American schools. In the school year 2007-2008, 20% of students enrolled in public schools in the United States were considered to be
Hispanics or Latinos, but only 7% of educators teaching kindergarten through 12th grade classes were Latino (NCES, 2008). Considering the impact that Latino representation in schools and school councils has on Latino parental involvement, and the importance of parental involvement in student achievement, this underrepresentation of Latino educators, staff, and school representatives may be detrimental to schools’ attempts to effectively involve Latino parents in their children’s education and to respond to the unique educational needs of Latino students (Gillanders, 2007).

**Challenges to Latino Parental Involvement.**

To better understand the challenges of Latino parental involvement, Shah (2009) explained the presence of four psychological barriers to parental participation among Latino parents. First, Latino parents may have different views of their role in their children’s education (*incongruent role construction*). Therefore, their ideas of what they are expected to do in relation to their children’s education may not match the expectations held by school personnel. Second, Latino parents may feel powerless in their capacity to influence their children’s educational outcomes (*low self-efficacy*). Third, Latino parents may be discouraged to participate in school activities because of a sense of not belonging to the school community (*low group identity*). Last but not least, Latino parents’ previous experiences with school personnel may cause them to develop uneasy feelings about future invitations to participate in school activities (*misperceptions of school invitations*). According to Shah, the presence of Latino school personnel assists Latino parents in changing their psychological orientations towards schools, becoming more connected with the school community, and feeling more empowered as they start feeling part of a group. As a result, Latino parents become more involved in school-related issues and other aspects of their children’s education.
Although research has shown lower levels of parental involvement among Latinos as compared to Whites, studies also indicate that Latino parents are interested in their children’s futures and view education as the way to improve their children’s opportunities in life (Orozco, 2008). Even so, Latino parents’ participation in the educational process of their children is limited by parent and school related factors that make collaboration between schools and families complicated. Many Latino immigrants may lack the educational experiences needed to be able to teach their children the academic socialization skills (e.g., linking education to everyday life activities, seeking assistance from educators, utilizing school resources) required for academic success. Thus, due to their limited resources, the obvious way in which many Latino parents could acquire such skills would be through the interaction with school personnel willing to teach them about the American education system. These issues become more evident for first-generation Latino immigrants. Therefore, to improve academic achievement among Latino students, schools need to develop culturally responsive plans that facilitate increased involvement of first-generation immigrant Latino parents in the education of their children.

**Parental Involvement among First-Generation Immigrant Families**

In the case of first-generation immigrant parents (i.e., parents who were born abroad and moved to the United States later), the different stages of the acculturation process (i.e. process of adjusting to a new place, culture, or language) also influence parenting styles, beliefs about child development, and characteristics of parental involvement (Driscoll, Russell, & Crockett, 2008). According to Brown (2000), acculturation stages include euphoria (enthusiasm and optimism about everything related to the new culture), culture shock (hostility towards the new culture), anomie (acknowledgement of positive and negative aspects of the new culture often accompanied by an identity crisis), and assimilation or acceptance (acceptance of the new culture...
accompanied by the recovery of self-confidence and identity). Immigrants often oscillate between two or three of these stages for a while before finally arriving to the acceptance stage.

The acculturation process is influenced by individual-level factors (e.g. age, gender, education, pre-immigration status, language, religion, personality) as well as group-level factors (e.g. immigration policies, ideology, attitudes of the host society towards immigrants, social support) surrounding each immigrant (Berry, 1997). The approach to acculturation that an immigrant employs (e.g. losing own cultural identity to the new culture, separating themselves from the new culture, integrating own cultural practices with practices from host culture, or loss of interest in maintaining own culture or participating in host culture) is often influenced by the response that individuals from the host culture have to the immigrant and his culture (Sam & Berry, 2010). In turn, acculturation levels impact family cohesion and adaptability of immigrant families. For example, members of immigrant Latino families with low levels of acculturation have a stronger emotional bonding, which is often accompanied by low levels of adaptability to the new culture (Miranda et al., 2000) as well as a preference for the Spanish language and high levels of acculturative stress (Miranda & Matheny, 2000).

Second-generation and third-generation immigrants (i.e., American-born children of first and second generation immigrants respectively) may also experience acculturation issues due to their minority status and/or family circumstances. However, their extensive exposure to American culture and society through the contact with American schools helps them acculturate much faster than their parents (Leidy et al., 2010). Thus, the acculturation process is more cumbersome for first-generation immigrants.

First-generation immigrants usually go through a series of stressful experiences involving the search for work opportunities and appropriate living arrangements, the dealing
with legal proceedings related to their immigration process, the learning of a new language and/or customs, and the adjustment to a new legal and educational system (Pumariega & Rothe, 2010). Moreover, they often lose the guidance and support of their extended family as well as their sense of cultural continuity, contributing to the amount of stress experienced as part of the process (Inman et al., 2007). The emotional stress suffered by first generation immigrants (especially new comers) may affect the way in which first-generation immigrant parents interact with school personnel and become involved in their children’s education.

Immigrant parents face additional situations when attempting to become involved with their children’s school as compared to those experienced by American-born White parents. Although many of these barriers are related to immigrants’ socio-economic status (immigrants have a higher probability to live in poverty according to the 2009 U.S. Census), immigrant parents whose primary language is not English appear to be particularly affected by inconvenient meeting times, schools not making parents feel welcome, and meetings being conducted only in English (Turney & Kao, 2009). These challenges often weaken immigrant parents’ ability to become involved in their children’s education.

Likewise, parental involvement among first-generation immigrants is impacted by parents’ confusion and/or disappointment with the American education system based on expectations resulting from their experiences with the educational system in their countries of origin. For example, some immigrant parents have reported being uncomfortable with the lack of discipline and respect in American schools compared to schools in their native countries (Leidy et al., 2010). Other first-generation immigrant parents feel that the quality of education in the United States is low and report being uncomfortable with the lack of a standardized curriculum; they feel that the emphasis of American schools on building students’ self-esteem
can become excessive and prevent teachers from providing necessary feedback about the students’ progress to the children and their parents (Nesteruk, Marks, & Garrison, 2009). Although, in most cases, immigration occurs because individuals believe that they can find better opportunities for personal and financial growth for themselves and their families in the host country, philosophical differences regarding how children must be educated and how schools should be run can make it difficult for new immigrants to comply with mainstream expectations of parental involvement.

In spite of the limitations to overt parental involvement experienced by first-generation immigrants, the high attendance rates evidenced by immigrant students (Conger et al., 2007) suggest that immigrant parents place a great value on school. Also, studies have shown that, although they are often less involved in activities at school, many first-generation immigrants, such as Asian parents, are more involved in explicitly teaching their children at home than American-born parents (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Therefore, school personnel need to understand the effect that culture and acculturation have on the different styles of parental involvement observed among immigrant parents. This understanding will allow educators to appreciate first-generation immigrant parents’ efforts to be involved in their children’s education and determine the most effective ways to promote school-parent collaboration.

Schecter and Sherri (2009) found that, after facilitating a program for racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse immigrant families, teachers reported a greater sense of responsibility towards diverse families. Furthermore, teachers showed a better understanding of the needs and responsibilities that minority families faced and developed a more positive attitude towards the cultural and linguistic differences exhibited by these families. These results cannot be generalized due to the small size of the sample used in this study (n=4) and the fact that all
participating teachers also came from culturally diverse backgrounds. However, these initial findings suggest the feasibility of improving relationships between school staff and culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant families through the implementation of school-supported programs and initiatives. Programs that encourage parents and teachers to work together are more likely to increase cross-cultural competence and collaboration among culturally and linguistically diverse parents, including first generation Latino immigrants.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Parental involvement is believed to play a crucial role in student academic success. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997 and IDEIA, 2004) highlights the importance of parental involvement for students with disabilities. Parents are guaranteed the right to act as active participants in the decision-making process in all aspects of their children’s education, including but not limited to, evaluation, eligibility, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) development, programming, and discipline. However, evidence suggests that parents of children with disabilities often struggle to exercise their right to actively participate in the special education process of their children due to a variety of school and parent-related factors. These factors can ultimately hinder the academic success of their child. According to research, issues such as teachers’ limited training in effective instructional methods (Zionts et al., 2003), insufficient services in schools (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010), educators’ failure to include parents in the decision-making process (Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley; Mueller et al., 2008), and parents’ insufficient knowledge about special education laws (Fish, 2006, 2008; Span et al., 2003) affect parents’ perception of, and participation in, the educational processes of their children with disabilities.
In addition to these challenges, Latino parents encounter unique barriers to their participation in the educational process of their children with disabilities which include, but are not limited to, parents’ communication problems due to limited English language proficiency (Hughes et al., 2008; Langdon, 2009), limited understanding of the American education system (Harry, 2002; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Olivos, 2009), and school personnel’s lack of expertise in using effective ways to collaborate with culturally and linguistically diverse families (Kozleski et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences that immigrant Latino parents have while navigating the special education system as well as how those experiences impact their participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities. By understanding the factors that influence the participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process, educators, teacher preparation programs, and parent advocates will be better equipped to attend to the issues that school personnel and educational leaders confront when working with Latino parents of children with disabilities.

Therefore, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1- What experiences do immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities, ages 3-12, have when navigating the special education system?

2- How do the experiences faced by immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities, ages 3-12, influence their participation in the special education process?

In order to conduct this investigation, a researcher-developed survey (Special Education Parent Participation Survey, SPED-PPS) was utilized to gather data regarding the different parent and school related factors affecting immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities. This survey included items concerning
general issues believed to influence participation in the special education process among all parents of children with disabilities as well as other factors that are considered to be particular to Latino parents. Considering the lack of available instruments to examine how different experiences affect the participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process, the creation of this survey is an important contribution of this study.

Summary

The rapid growth of the Latino population in the United States has created a need for researchers and practitioners to learn more about the experiences that Latino parents of children with disabilities have while navigating the American special education system. However, research in this area is limited. Most studies have been too small to provide generalizable results. Other studies have failed to consider cultural differences among the sub-groups that make up the Latino culture.

In this study, data were collected regarding the experiences that Latino parents of children with disabilities face when navigating the special education system. The impact of such experiences on immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process was examined.
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

This literature review explores school and family related factors influencing Latino parents’ participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities. First, a brief summary of findings supporting the positive association between parental involvement and achievement of students with disabilities is provided. Next, the role of parents as active participants in all educational decisions concerning their children with disabilities is examined. Parents’ experiences when attempting to comply with expectations of parental participation are reviewed. Then, the influence of diversity on parental participation in the special education process is discussed. The impact of Latino parents’ cultural background on their perception of the special education system is further explored. Finally, a conceptual framework is proposed to explain the relationship between the school and parent-related factors described in this literature review and first generation immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process.

The special education process comprises all the procedures and activities involved in the education of children with disabilities who receive special education services. According to the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), these aspects include the areas of evaluation, eligibility, assistive technology, Individualized Education Program (IEP) development, discipline, transportation, educational programming (i.e. including general and specialized instruction) and any related services (e.g. speech, physical and occupational therapy, audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, therapeutic recreation, social work services, school nurse services, counseling services, and orientation and mobility services) that are deemed necessary to address the child’s individual cognitive-academic, physical, social-
emotional, communication, and adaptive needs. The following section provides a summary of research findings regarding the effects of parental involvement on the achievement of students with disabilities.

**Parental Involvement and Students with Disabilities**

Parental involvement has been defined as parental participation in the educational process and experiences of their children (Jeynes, 2007). It includes childrearing practices, communication with school personnel, and parent support of the child’s learning (Eccles & Harold, 1996 as cited by Trainor, 2010) as well as participation in school events and meetings (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, 1996, 1998). Parental involvement is a crucial factor in student academic achievement. In the case of children with disabilities, parental involvement becomes even more important, as these students are usually less capable of communicating their needs and advocating for themselves. Special education laws have emphasized the importance of family participation in the education of children with disabilities (IDEIA 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Data on the relationship between parental involvement and achievement of students with disabilities have not been comprehensively and systematically collected and analyzed (Trainor, 2010b). However, preliminary information indicates a positive correlation between parental participation in school-related activities and student academic achievement (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). For instance, in a longitudinal study following the progress of 704 children who received early intervention services (individually designed services for children birth to three, and their families), Miedel and Reynolds (1999) found that the number of school-related activities these children experienced in preschool and kindergarten in which parents participated was significantly associated with higher achievement scores in reading and lower rates of retention.
through eighth grade. In fact, parent participation in five or more school activities was associated with an increase of reading scores of approximately three months in kindergarten and seven months in eighth grade.

Similarly, a recent study by McDonnell, Cavbaugh, and Giesen (2010) showed that parental involvement at school (attending meetings with teachers or administrator, attending general school meetings and events, and volunteering at school) had a positive effect on the mathematics achievement of children with visual impairments. This effect was significant when studied longitudinally and became stronger as the students went from elementary into the middle school grades. Furthermore, the researchers found that parental involvement at home (assistance with homework, talking to the child about school experiences, and reading to the child) had positive effects on student achievement among students who had cognitive disabilities along with visual impairments. This finding may be associated with the students’ greater need for assistance and encouragement to succeed academically due to the severity of their disability. Nevertheless, the results of this study suggest that parental involvement with schools may positively influence schools’ implementation of the special education process (e.g. school personnel’s willingness to provide accommodations for the student) and improve outcomes for children with disabilities.

**Parental Participation in the Special Education Process**

Students with disabilities are protected by federal laws (i.e. Individual with Disabilities Act) intended to improve educational outcomes and ensure that these individuals receive an appropriate education. These protections include the right of parents to participate in the special education process of their children with disabilities. However, parents’ participation in the
education of their children with disabilities is impacted by intrinsic (e.g. individual traits) as well as extrinsic factors (e.g. environment).

Ingber, Al-Yagon, and Dromi (2010) found that mothers’ emotional states and social supports influenced their involvement in their children’s early intervention. After completing multiple assessments and questionnaires with 180 mothers of children with hearing impairments, the researchers determined that high levels of anxiety, anger, and pessimism about the child’s disability and potential had a negative effect on mother’s involvement in their children’s programs. Conversely, mothers’ high levels of curiosity (i.e. interest in learning about new things) and motivation had a positive impact on their involvement.

Intrinsic (e.g. parents’ personal strengths) and extrinsic (e.g. available supports within the family, community, and school support) may influence the type of participation in their children’s education to which parents are able to commit. Parents of children with disabilities may struggle to fulfill some of the expectations for parental participation in their children’s education. For instance, in a study about parental involvement in intensive behavioral programs (n=13), Granger, des Rivieres-Pigeon, Sabourin, and Forget (2010) noticed that mothers of young children with autism reported attending meetings, relating information about the program to professionals or relatives, learning about the program’s principles and procedures, and assisting professionals as the most common ways in which they participated in their children’s programs. However, the four mothers who reported actually implementing the behavioral program with their children complained about difficulties fulfilling the dual role of parent and educator. Consequently, most of these mothers (3 out 4) quit the implementation of the program as soon as a professional became available to take charge.
The interaction between individual and environmental factors affecting parental participation in the special education process influences all aspects of parental involvement, including parents’ understanding of the special education laws, parents’ perception of the special education process, parents’ participation in IEP meetings, parents’ ability to communicate and collaborate effectively with special education professionals, and parents’ level of satisfaction with the services that their children receive.

**IDEA Mandates for Parental Involvement**

Special education mandates have clearly established the role of parents as active participants in their children’s education. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997; IDEIA 2004), parents are considered active participants in all decision-making aspects regarding the children’s evaluation and eligibility for special education services, Individualized Education Program (IEP) development, and discipline. Consequently, although parents are not legally mandated to voice their opinion in regards to every aspect of their children’s special education process, their written consent is required before beginning the evaluation process to determine eligibility for special services and before actually placing the child in any special education program. Furthermore, once the student has been placed in special education, schools are required to treat parents as equal members of the IEP team, provide them with ample opportunities for meaningful participation in all decisions related to the education of their children, and ensure parents’ understanding of procedural safeguards and proceedings (Fish, 2008; Kalyanpur et al., 2000).

Despite the evidence showing the positive effects of parental involvement and the legal efforts to promote parental participation in special education, parents often struggle to fulfill their role as active participants (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). This failure to actively participate in the
educational decisions related to their children with disabilities is often the result of parent and school related issues that limit parents’ ability to collaborate with school personnel and to contribute to their children’s special education decision-making process. For example, in a recent qualitative study exploring the factors facilitating parent participation in special education, Trainor (2010b) found that parents’ cultural and social capital (understanding of the system and having the social skills required to be successful in it) considerably influenced their ability to use their children’s disability label to secure services for their children. Parents’ resources also impacted parents’ tendencies to advocate for more inclusive settings for their children.

This issue becomes even more evident among culturally and linguistically diverse parents who may lack basic understanding of the American education system and the expectations that school professionals may have of them. In addition, although special education laws demand that schools take actions to ensure that parents with limited English language proficiency understand the IEP meeting proceedings and have meaningful opportunities to participate in their children’s education, studies have shown that the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse parents is often negatively affected by the poor quality of language interpreting services offered by schools (Cheatham, 2010).

**Advocacy Skills**

Although IDEA does not utilize the word *advocacy* when referring to the role of parents as active participants in the special education process, experts often agree that the spirit of the law actually implies the exercise of parental advocacy (Kalyanpur et al, 2000; Trainor, 2010a, b). For example, parents’ consent is necessary to perform the evaluation leading to the eligibility and placement of their children in special education. This requirement compels parents to participate in decisions about what they believe to be the best approach for addressing their
children’s educational needs. Likewise, parents are expected to express their opinions regarding their children’s strengths, weaknesses, and educational needs, especially during the IEP process. By taking part in these discussions, parents are given the opportunity to influence the judgments that schools make regarding their children’s needs and to advocate for appropriate services. Therefore, when referring to parents of children with disabilities who receive special education services, advocacy can be interpreted as a variation of parental involvement that is usually not expected of parents of children without disabilities.

Nonetheless, parents’ aptitude to advocate for their children with disabilities is determined by individual as well as social and cultural factors. In a study exploring parents’ advocacy skills in special education, Trainor (2010b) identified four approaches to parental advocacy. These approaches represent different levels and types of parental involvement in the special education process. They also dictate the degree of active participation that parents are able to have in their children’s special education decision making process, depending on the style of advocacy (or involvement) that they choose. Distinctive categories of parent advocacy in special education include (a) the intuitive advocate, (b) the disability expert, (c) the strategist, and (d) the change agent.

According to Trainor (2020b), parents who act as intuitive agents concentrate on sharing intuitive knowledge about their children’s preferences, strengths and weaknesses, and needs with school personnel. Because this type of information is usually disregarded by educators, intuitive agency often results in feelings of frustration and failed advocacy among parents of children with disabilities. Thus, parental participation in the special education process may be very limited and ineffective.
In contrast, parents categorized as *disability experts* incorporate knowledge about their children’s disabilities into their interactions with school staff. They often connect with other parents through the pursuit of knowledge about their children’s disability. This connection may help them combat the feelings of isolation that usually accompany having a child with special needs. Parents who fit within the *disability expert* category participate more actively in the decisions regarding their children’s special education and are more likely to achieve the goal of school-parent collaboration than their *intuitive agent* counterparts. However, the increase in parental involvement and participation often comes at the expense of feeling emotionally exhausted after having to constantly confront teachers’ deficit views. In addition, these parents may become overwhelmed by the frequent disability-related discussions in which they engage.

Parents who act like *strategists* have knowledge about special education laws and procedures as well as their parental rights to advocate for their children with disabilities. They fully understand the role that they could play in the educational decisions concerning their children. They view the IEP as legal confirmation of everything that should be happening at school. Even though these parents are often not very well regarded by their children’s schools’ staff due to the constant supervision that they exercise over their children’s educational program, they are usually very effective in creating a place for themselves in the decision-making process. As a result, they display significant amounts of parental involvement in the education of their children with disabilities.

Finally, parents who fall within the *change agents* category are concerned not only about the outcomes of their advocacy efforts in their own children’s educational opportunities, but also about the need for systemic change. This parental approach to advocacy seems to be associated with the family’s availability of economic resources. It entails sacrificing personal time to create
easier paths and fairer treatment for other families, especially those who may not be able to advocate for themselves and their children. These parents are frequently very involved in the education of their children with disabilities and enjoy high levels of participation in the special education problem-solving process.

Even though these varied approaches are observed across families from different backgrounds and race/ethnicity, socio-economic status seems to be the most influential factor in selecting a particular advocacy approach among parents of children who receive special education. For example, Trainor (2010b) found that parents from low socio-economic status and low educational levels usually used a more intuitive approach that focused on their personal knowledge of their children, possibly implying limited knowledge about their child’s disability and special education issues. Since a well-known relationship between minorities and low socio-economic status in the United States exists (NCES, 2007), it is not surprising that most of the parents within this category who participated in this study belonged to ethnic minority groups (Latino, African-American, and Native American Indian). On the other hand, most of parents who favored the strategist approach belonged to European-American families with middle to high socio-economic levels. These parents were able to complement the information about their children’s individual characteristics with information about their disabilities. Also, they understood facts about the special education law which translated into more effective advocacy.

Parents who participated in the disability expert approach were grouped primarily by their children’s disability (e.g. autism) rather than ethnicity or socio-economic class. Parents from all ethnic backgrounds (except for African Americans) utilized this approach. Even so, these parents tended to seek support for learning more about their children’s disability from groups of
parents who shared their cultural and ethnic background (e.g., Autism support group for Latino parents).

Advocacy is one of the most defining aspects of parental involvement in special education. Therefore, the diversity markers (e.g., ethnicity, socio-economic status, cultural and linguistic background) affecting parents’ advocacy styles might also explain parents’ overall participation in the special education process. Culturally diverse parents who are not accustomed to the concept of advocacy may be more likely to choose a less demanding advocacy style. Consequently, they may not choose to actively participate in some important decisions regarding the education of their children with disabilities.

Parents’ Perceptions of the Special Education Process

Parental involvement in school affairs and their children’s education has been a focus of researchers for several decades. For the families of children with disabilities, parental involvement also includes the opportunity for parents to participate in the decision-making process regarding all aspects of their children’s education, as stated by IDEA (Trainor, 2010b). However, parental involvement in special education is likely to be affected by a variety of factors, including parents’ perceptions of the special education system. Researchers in the area of parental involvement in special education tend to focus on parents’ experiences with the special education process and perceptions of their children’s educational programs. The components of the special education process about which parents have voiced their opinion include the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) process, parent-school communication and collaboration, and parents’ satisfaction with the services that their children receive.
Parental Participation in the IEP Meeting

The IEP meeting is a crucial event in the special education decision making process because it provides parents and teachers of children with disabilities with an opportunity to come together as a team to discuss the students’ progress and current needs. The IEP meeting occurs at least once per year. During the IEP meeting, all members of the decision-making team have a chance to express their concerns about the student and to share information about the student’s current level of performance. Furthermore, a written plan for addressing the students’ needs is developed. This Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) includes goals that address all areas impacted by the student’s disability. Likewise, decisions regarding who will be in charge of delivering instruction and related services are made. As members of the IEP team, parents are entitled to partake in the decisions made during the IEP meeting. Schools are required to make every effort to guarantee parental attendance and participation in the process.

Parental involvement and participation in the IEP meeting are generally influenced by a variety of issues. In a qualitative study involving parents of children with autism (n=10), Fish (2006) found that participants’ overall experiences during IEP meetings were negative. Parents reported not being treated as equal members of the team during IEP meetings. They complained about their opinions not being valued. Also, parents believed that school professionals saw the IEP as a mere formality and did not feel compelled to address the goals and objectives selected during the meeting. Thus, participants saw a true need for parents to be actively involved in the IEP process in order to secure appropriate services for their children.

However, parents’ perceptions of the IEP meeting may vary depending on individual experiences. For example, in a subsequent study involving middle and upper middle class parents of children receiving special services, Fish (2008) found that the majority of parents had
positive perceptions of IEP meetings because educators acknowledged their input and treated them with respect. The parents, all of whom participated in a family support agency, emphasized the need for parents of children who receive special services to be proactive during meetings by asking questions and making suggestions to the rest of the team. They recommended that parents become educated in all aspects of the special education law and the IEP process in order to improve the outcomes of IEP meetings. In fact, parents felt that their understanding of the special education process was the number one factor impacting the outcomes for their children’s IEP meetings and, consequently, the type of services that they received.

These statements are consistent with other studies indicating an association between parents’ level of satisfaction with the special education process and the amount of knowledge that they have about special education laws and the IEP process. For instance, in a study about the experiences of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, researchers found that 78% of the participating parents reported moderate to high degrees of knowledge about what was written in their child’s IEP. Out of the group of parents who felt confident about their knowledge of the special education laws, 11 percent of them reported having little involvement in the development of their child’s IEP. In addition, 14 and 13 percent of parents expressed having low and high levels of satisfaction with the IEP process respectively (Spann et al., 2003). Although these findings support the idea that parents who are knowledgeable about special education laws and procedures enjoy higher levels of satisfaction with their children’s IEP process, the study failed to provide data regarding the levels of satisfaction of less informed parents.

In another study by Lake and Billingsley (2000), parents and school administrators’ knowledge of the special education law and procedures was proposed as a crucial factor in
preventing parent-school conflict in special education. In other words, IEP teams seem to be more effective in making appropriate educational decisions when all members of the team are knowledgeable about special education issues. As teams become more skilled, parental satisfaction with the special education process increases, and the occurrence of overt clashes between schools and parents is reduced.

Collectively, these studies suggest that parents’ knowledge of the special education laws, procedures and best practices empower parents to have more active participation in their children’s IEP meetings. A possible explanation for this could be that knowing how the special education process works makes parents more confident in their ability to communicate with school personnel about their children’s education. Also, understanding recommended educational practices for children with specific disabilities allows parents to specifically ask about what they believe their children need and to make concrete contributions during the decision making process. Also, school personnel may be more inclined to acknowledge informed parents’ concerns and opinions and to incorporate their suggestions in the IEP due to fears of legal repercussions for not doing so. At the same time, school personnel who are knowledgeable of special education laws may be more likely to encourage parental participation in the IEP meeting as they possess a better understanding of the rationale for parental involvement in the special education process.

**Communication and Collaboration**

Parents’ perception of the special education process is not only influenced by the interactions with school personnel that occur during the IEP meeting, but also by the quality of the communication and collaboration that they have with the different members of the team throughout the school year. For example, studies conducted with African-American families of
children with disabilities indicate that the communication between this group of parents and school personnel might be hindered by parents’ perception of the school’s negativity toward their children and families due to issues related to cultural diversity (Zions et al., 2003). As a result, parents’ trust in the ability and willingness of the school to do what is best for their children is diminished. This mistrust impedes effective parent-school collaboration and has the potential to negatively affect parents’ involvement in the special education process of their children with disabilities.

Another aspect of parent-school communication and collaboration that may affect parents’ perception of the special education process is the nature of the interactions between parents and school personnel. Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) found that the frequency and quality of communication between parents of children with low incidence disabilities and school staff decreased as children became older. While most families of younger children communicated with school staff at least once per week, the frequency of these communications decreased as students moved into the upper grades. By the time the children were 15-18 year-old, 17% of parents reported communicating with school staff less than once or twice per month. Also, in regards to the characteristics of the communication between parents and school, 91% of parents expressed that they communicated with school staff mainly about the student’s progress or behavior at school; 75% of parents communicated about issues that surfaced at home or school and brainstormed with teachers to solve these problems; and 31% of parents expressed that the main focus of their interactions with school staff was associated with conflicts and disagreements. This study did not specifically explore the relationship between different types of parent-school communication in the special education process. However, the decreasing opportunities for collaboration and communication that occurred in the upper grades, in addition
to the negative nature of many of the interactions between parents and school personnel, might
have a bearing on parents’ participation in the special education process.

**Parental Satisfaction with School Services**

Parents’ satisfaction with their children’s educational program and services is another
area that seems to have an impact on the perceptions that parents hold of the special education
process. Research has suggested that some of the most important factors that increase parents’
level of comfort with their children’s schools are schools’ welcoming atmosphere, teachers’
respectful attitudes towards families, and teachers’ encouragement of parental participation in
educational decisions (Fish, 2008). Accordingly, parents who perceive cultural
misunderstanding or prejudice among school personnel may be more likely to make negative
assessments of their children’s educational programs. At the same time, parents who feel
comfortable around their children’s teachers are more likely to be satisfied with their programs.

Zionts, Zionts, Harrison, and Bellinger (2003) found that African-American parents were
concerned about the lack of qualifications of some of their children’s teachers to work with
students with special needs and believed that teachers should learn from parents’ expertise about
their own children. They proposed that teacher training should incorporate elements of cultural
sensitivity and disability advocacy skills. Also, in a study seeking to identify means for reducing
parental dissatisfaction and parent-school conflict in special education, Mueller, Singer, and
Drapper (2008) found that parental complaints were often the result of the administrators’ lack of
leadership and refusal to keep up with special education laws. This study found that this attitude
on the part of school administrators frequently resulted in outdated special education services
and an increasing number of students whose needs were not being met.
In a study examining the outcomes of families receiving early intervention services (individually designed services for children birth to three, and their families, intended to enhance children’s physical, cognitive, communication, social or emotional and/or adaptive development), non-English speaking Latino families assigned significantly lower ratings to the program’s helpfulness than English proficient Latino and non-Latino families (Olmsted et al., 2010).

In summary, research suggests that parents’ perceptions of the special education process are influenced by their knowledge of special education procedures, ability to communicate with school professionals, and level of satisfaction with their children’s educational programs. An understanding of special education procedures and laws facilitates parents’ participation in the special education process. Likewise, parents are able to take on a more active role during IEP meetings when they understand the special education process. Also, parents’ perceptions of the special education process are highly influenced by their ability to communicate and collaborate with school personnel. Parents’ perception of the special education process is also affected by their own assessment of the services that special education professionals provide to their children. For this reason, to successfully participate in the special education process, parents may need to become more knowledgeable about special education laws and procedures and to develop more effective means of communicating with the special education professionals working with their children.

**Tensions and Challenges in Navigating the Special Education Process**

Parents’ participation in the special education decision-making process of their children with disabilities is sometimes limited by parental and school related factors negatively impacting parent-school collaboration. These factors include issues of service delivery, parents’ and schools’ different views and expectations, school professionals’ lack of cultural sensitivity, and
legal conflicts between parents and schools. Such issues generate feelings of apprehension and frustration among members of the decision-making team. Factors impacting parent-school collaboration are often perceived as challenges by parents and school personnel seeking to improve parental involvement in special education.

**Issues of Service Delivery**

Studies suggest that parents of children with disabilities are generally satisfied with the quality of the special education services that their children receive (Olmsted, 2010). However, a closer look at their results shows that some parents believe that the services schools provide are not enough to address their children’s needs. Spann et al. (2003) found that parents of younger children with autism believed that schools had the ability to meet their children’s educational needs more frequently than parents of older students. For instance, while 36% of parents of preschool-aged children believed that schools established appropriate priorities for their children, 83% of parents of high school-aged children believed that schools did little or nothing to address their children’s most pressing needs.

Issues regarding teachers’ lack of training in effective instructional methods (Zionts et al., 2003), insufficient services (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010), and professionals’ failure to include parents in the decision-making process (Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley; Mueller et al., 2008) are often mentioned in the special education, parent satisfaction literature. Fish (2008) found that placement, services, and disciplinary issues were the primary cause for disagreements between parents and schools during IEP meetings. In other studies, parents expressed frustration with the inability of schools to plan in advance for the services and programs that their children would require and to explain their reasons for failing to provide such services when needed (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).
The fact that parental discontent with special education services is a common reason for conflict between schools and families suggests that parents’ perception of the quality of services greatly influences their participation in the special education process. However, parents respond to their lack of satisfaction with the services that their children receive in a variety of ways. For example, parents may use a problem-solving approach to handle the situation. They may ask more questions during IEP meetings, request additional meetings during the school year, or visit their child’s school often to ensure compliance with IEP goals. Less assertive and/or culturally and linguistically diverse parents may choose to stay away from school to avoid confrontation with their children’s teachers. At the same time, parents who are satisfied with their children’s services may become more involved in the special education decision-making process since they feel comfortable collaborating with school personnel. They may also become less involved as the need to pressure school personnel to provide appropriate instruction disappears. Regardless of the approach adopted by the parent, parental involvement in the education of their children with disabilities is influenced by issues associated with the delivery of special education services.

**Different Views and Expectations**

Having different expectations of each other’s roles can create tension between educators and parents of children with disabilities. Parents have indicated a necessity for school to help them become better advocates for their children with disabilities by educating them about special education laws and about their children’s exceptionalities (Hughes et al., 2008; Ziots et al., 2003). This parental expectation may lead to disappointment since, in reality, school personnel have limited time and resources to educate parents about their children’s disabilities and educational rights. As a result, parents may resent schools for not sharing more information with
them. Parents’ unfulfilled expectations may, in turn, lead to ineffective parental participation in the special education process.

Having different views of, and expectations for, children may obstruct parent-school collaboration during the special education process. Lake and Billingsley (2000) found that discrepancies in the perception of what a child needs is the most frequent factor precipitating conflict between schools and parents of children with disabilities. Parents of children receiving special education services complained about school personnel not seeing their children as individuals with unique strengths and needs. They believed that schools looked at children from a deficit-perspective that focused on the child’s weaknesses.

Educators’ and parents’ expectations of the student are shaped by their views on the child’s disability and educational needs. Based on their expectations, they each define what would constitute appropriate special education services for the child. School-parent differences in views and expectations of children with disabilities is a notable factor in shaping parental participation in the special education process, as indicated by the conflicts resulting from these disagreements.

**Lack of Cultural Sensitivity**

Cultural sensitivity is known to have an impact on the relationship between school personnel and culturally diverse families. It affects parental satisfaction with special education personnel and services. Lack of cultural sensitivity and competence generates tension, and even friction, between schools and culturally diverse parents. Zionts et al. (2003) found that African-American parents often felt blamed for their children’s disabilities by their children’s teachers and other school staff. They resented teachers’ negative comments about their children and interpreted it as “harassment”. They believed that teachers often failed to discern between
behaviors explained by cultural differences and those resulting from a disability. They also expressed a desire for teachers to develop a greater understanding of the difference between disability and culture-based behaviors. According to Lake and Billingsley (2000), feeling devaluated is one of the main reasons that cause parents to experience hostility towards schools. Therefore, school personnel need to evaluate their attitudes towards culturally diverse parents in order to prevent conflict and improve parental involvement in the special education process.

**Legal Issues in Special Education**

Parents of children with disabilities often face obstacles when pursuing appropriate services for their children, communicating with school personnel, and dealing with some educators’ lack of cultural sensitivity. As a result, parents may feel the need to resort to legal means to secure adequate education for their children. For instance, according to Wagner and Katsiyannis (2010), a total of 120 cases related to special education have been processed in the United States legal system since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004. Such cases included court decisions, administrative due process hearings, and rulings by the Office of Civil Rights. In these cases, parents complained about problems with interim and alternative educational settings, functional behavioral assessments, and behavioral intervention plans, among others. However, the most commonly reoccurring issue was related to schools’ disciplinary exclusions of students covered under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (a civil rights statute which prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities). The authors also report that, in the 2006-2007 school year only, parents of children with disabilities made 3,546 official complaints, requested 2,879 legal mediations, and petitioned 3,263 due process hearings. Information about how, or if, these conflicts were resolved was not reported.
The prevalence of legal conflict between parents of children with disabilities and schools suggests that the barriers created by parents’ difficulties communicating with school personnel and obtaining appropriate services for their children may indeed lead to more serious, and costly, consequences. Thus, to avoid the escalation of parent-school conflict, school personnel must become more skilled in facilitating communication and collaboration between special education staff and parents of children with disabilities. In their study about the factors that contribute to the escalation or de-escalation of parent-school legal conflicts in special education, Lake and Billingsley (2000) identified eight categories of events that caused conflict between schools and parents to escalate. These factors include:

1. Discrepancies in parents’ and school views’ of the child and his needs, especially related to parents’ perceptions that school personnel focused more on the child’s weaknesses rather than on his unique characteristics. This category appeared to be a precipitating factor in 90% of the cases of conflict between schools and parents of children with disabilities.

2. Lack of knowledge about the child’s disability and the special education laws and procedures. Parents, school officials, and state appointed conflict mediators expressed a need for all participants in the special education process to be more knowledgeable about special education in order to make appropriate decisions about assessment, instruction, and related services. They believed that an increased understanding of special education issues among all members of the decision-making team would help prevent legal confrontation between schools and parents.

3. Schools’ inability, or unwillingness, to provide services deemed necessary by parents. This failure to provide services led to parental discontent with the type or quality of the
services offered by the schools.

4. Lack of balance in the power exercised by schools in making decisions. Parents did not feel treated as equal partners in the problem-solving and decision-making process. This sense of inequality created tension between them and their children’s schools. However, parents and school officials both agreed that the exercise of excessive power on either part usually caused conflict to escalate.

5. Communication issues including insufficient contact between school personnel and parents, schools’ failure to follow up on previously discussed issues, misunderstandings, and delayed clarification attempts. For parents and school officials, the perception of the other party withholding information or not listening to them generated antagonistic feelings and escalated conflict.

6. Parents feeling that schools did not value them as members of the team. Conflicts tended to escalate when parents’ experienced feelings of devaluation or felt that school personnel were treating them in a condescending manner.

7. Parent doubts about school personnel doing what was best for their children. Parents whose trust in the school had been broken perceived more significant discrepancies between their views and educators’ views of the child. This made it difficult for them to accept suggestions from school personnel and resulted in the escalation of conflict.

8. Constraints placed on school resources (e.g., time, finances, personnel, and materials) that resulted in schools not providing appropriate services. Parents resented how special education issues affected the schools’ ability to provide appropriate services for their children. Parents were discouraged by the state of special education, and their frustration also caused tension between them and schools.
Special education issues are a constant source of legal altercation for school districts around the country. However, most of the reasons leading to legal conflict between schools and parents usually start as mere disagreements (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010). That initial tension has the potential to escalate into liability issues when ignored by schools. As active participants in the special education process, parents must sometimes decide whether to treat a concern about their children’s education as a “source of tension” between them and the school or as a serious problem demanding legal attention. Determining the most effective approach to take when problems with school personnel arise is another challenge that parents of children with disabilities face when navigating the special education process.

**Influence of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity on Parent Participation**

According to Chamberlain (2005), culture refers to the preferred way of understanding and interacting, seeing and doing by members of a particular group. Factors such as family cultural capital, cultural perspective, and life experiences may influence how parents view their children’s disability, relate to the education system, and respond to expectations regarding the roles of schools and parents in the education of their children with disabilities (Olivos, 2009). Culture may cause families to have different ideas about how they want to be involved in their children’s educational process. Parents’ cultural backgrounds may shape their understanding of the special education system. Therefore, school professionals must be aware of how different cultures conceptualize appropriate parental involvement. These differences are usually defined by an array of factors (e.g. ethnicity, country of origin, educational levels, socio-economic status, length of time living in the United States), and they may have a considerable impact in the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse parents in the special education process of their children with disabilities.
According to Harry (2002), the cultural identity of a family incorporates aspects of its original micro-culture (culture of the subgroup of society with which the family identifies) and of the macro-culture (mainstream culture) where it currently exists. Factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, language, social class, geographical location, personal interests, and educational level have a significant effect on the way that a family responds to institutional regulations and expectations established by schools and the special education process.

After completing an extensive review of the literature, Harry (2000) identified six areas of concern in the provision of culturally appropriate services to families of children receiving special education and services: (a) cultural variations in the way parents and professionals understand the disability, (b) cultural differences in the way parents respond to issues related to the disability, (c) cultural differences in interaction styles and attitudes toward advocacy, (d) “culturally influenced” ability to access information and services, (e) cultural fit of the special education programs, and (f) professionals’ negative perceptions of the role of parents in the special education process. Harry argued that some culturally diverse parents may have ideas of what represents normal child development and behavior that vary from those supported by school personnel. For instance, parents who come from environments where most people have had limited access to formal education may not see the presence of a specific learning disability in reading as a limitation for having a “normal” life and taking care of oneself. These differences may be explained by macro-cultural aspects (e.g., ethnicity, country of origin) or micro-cultural factors related to personal experiences (e.g., families affected by generational poverty).

In addition, culture may determine the importance that families attribute to group versus individual goals. Research indicates that many culturally diverse groups belong to collectivist cultures that emphasize social relationships, group goals, group harmony, and collaborative
learning rather than self-reliance and individual achievement (Chamberlain, 2005). Therefore, culturally diverse families may be unfamiliar, or even uncomfortable, with the idea of fulfilling the expectations of parental advocacy stressed by the special education mandates. For example, parents from cultures where children are granted little decision-making authority may be offended by educators’ insistence on training their children to make important decisions about their lives (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). As a result, culturally diverse parents may reject special education programs that they believe to promote cultural values that contradict their own.

Trainor (2010a) suggests that culturally diverse families may have particular difficulty fulfilling the parental role established in special education laws due to cultural inequities and presumptions imposed by the law itself. The concept of parental participation and advocacy included in IDEA and IDEIA assumes that all parents share the value of freedom of choice and are equipped to defend their individual rights. However, the values of equity, individual rights, promotion of independence, and freedom reflected in the law may not resonate with the beliefs of some culturally and linguistically diverse families (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). This is a critical point for schools to keep in mind since the stress that special education programs put on individuality and independence may conflict with the more collective goals often held by families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Likewise, differences in the educational priorities set by schools and parents may have a negative effect on the involvement exhibited by culturally diverse parents. Their ability to advocate for their children with disabilities may be influenced by their family’s priorities rather than special education mandates or expectations.

Olivos (2009) described the different ways in which parent-school collaboration affects families, schools, and students. According to this author, parent-school collaboration allows
school staff to develop a broader perspective of how cultural and linguistic factors influence student performance. At the same time, culturally and linguistically diverse parents benefit from developing connections with professionals who help them understand the system’s expectations, regulations, and procedures and lead them to additional resources. This increased understanding of their surroundings may facilitate culturally and linguistically diverse parents’ participation in their children’s educational decision-making process. Consequently, students profit from educational decisions that are more relevant to their needs and focus on skills that will not create conflict between school and home.

According to Harry (2002), schools must become aware of the cultural nature of the disability construct. They need to consider the possibility that culturally diverse parents may interpret their child’s condition in ways that do not necessarily conform to mainstream definitions utilized by special education professionals. In other words, educators must realize that perceptions of disabilities vary among cultures. What could be considered a reason for concern in mainstream American culture may not be seen as a significant problem in other cultures, or vice versa. Identifying these potential differences is critical for comprehending parents’ responses to schools’ attempts to address children’s disabilities. It could also assist educators in understanding diverse parents’ goals for their children with disabilities. Once they become aware of cultural variations in disability conceptualization and interaction styles, educators can modify the way they communicate information about the special education process to diverse parents.

To summarize, cultural and linguistic factors influence parental participation in the special education process. Therefore, school personnel need to understand the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity on parents’ perception of special education in order to facilitate their
participation in the process. Understanding how Latino culture affects parents’ perception of the special education process is crucial for American educators since Latinos remain the largest minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

**Latino Parents’ Perception of the Special Education Process**

Culturally and linguistically diverse families may have different ideas about their own role in their children’s education. These differences in opinion are likely to influence their interactions with school personnel. Studies have shown a tendency among Latino parents to view special education professionals as “experts” (Hughes et al., 2008) from whom they prefer to maintain a “respectful distance” (Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001). This style of interaction is shaped by cultural values contradictory to those stated in the IDEA philosophy which insist on parents acting as active participants in every educational decision concerning their children with disabilities. Nevertheless, school personnel could misinterpret this type of behavior as lack of parental involvement unless they are familiar with the Latino culture’s views on the role of parents in their children’s education.

Harry (1992) found that a sense of deference towards school professionals often lead Puerto Rican parents of children with disabilities to “agree” to what was proposed during IEP meetings, even if they did not believe that it was the best thing for their children. For example, a parent might sign the IEP even though she did not agree with the decisions made. However, after doing that, parents would still seek passive ways to disengage from their decisions such as complaining to other parents or not attending the next meeting. Puerto Rican parents perceived American schools as being much more impersonal settings than schools in their native land. This made it difficult for them to trust educators and honestly communicate their opinions about the decision made by school personnel regarding their children’s education. Consequently, they
acted in ways that seemed contradictory or confusing to American educators, creating conflict and mistrust between parents and school personnel. The struggles shown by Puerto Rican parents in this study are likely to be present among other Latino sub-groups since deference to school professionals is a common value among Latinos.

Also, in a qualitative study exploring the views of Latino families of children with disabilities, Hughes, Valle-Riestra, and Arguelles (2008) found that Latino families recognized individual differences among children; yet, they avoided focusing on the child’s disability. Their primary goal was for their children to adapt to their environment and reach an acceptable level of independence. To accomplish this goal, they focused on the development of physical and academic skills. Latino parents asserted that families played the most important role in the child’s life since they had the capacity to communicate, inform, and ask questions on behalf of the child. At the same time, they expressed feeling helpless when dealing with their children with disabilities and indicated a desire to communicate more with school staff to learn ways in which they could help their children. Latino parents believed that schools were responsible for educating families about the special education process, services, and programs.

These findings reinforce the idea that Latino parents’ perceptions of the special education process may be influenced by their cultural expectations of the distinctive roles that school professionals and parents have in the education of children with disabilities. Latino parents’ perceptions of their role in the special education process appear to be in disagreement with the expectation of active participation held by special education mandates and many American educators. For that reason, Latino parents need to become familiar with special education procedures in order to understand the social and legal expectations that have been placed on
them in terms of their participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities.

**Latino Parents’ Knowledge of Special Education Procedures**

Some research has shown that Latino parents express confidence in their understanding of the special education process and affirm satisfaction with their children educational programs (Hughes et al., 2008). However, more in depth analysis of the data often indicates discrepancies between the answers these parents provided and their actions (Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001). Such discrepancies suggest that Latino parents may not be as knowledgeable about the special education laws as they claim.

In a qualitative study exploring the use of special education services among Latino parents of young children with disabilities, Bailey, Skinner, Rodriguez, Gut, and Correa (1999) found that only 10% of parents believed that they had limited awareness of available services. Parents with lower levels of awareness of special education services tended to be more satisfied with their children’s services and did not pursue additional ones. In contrast, parents with high levels of awareness of special education services were more likely to request and access specific services for their children. These results indicate that the amount of knowledge that Latino parents have about special education services affect their ability to advocate for their child in the special education decision-making process.

Further research is required to understand how Latino parents’ knowledge, or lack thereof, of special education procedures and recommended practices may shape their perception of their children’s educational programs. However, current evidence suggests that the amount of information that Latino parents have about special education influences their involvement in the education of their children with disabilities. Also, first-generation immigrant Latino parents
seem to face similar, as well as unique, situations when participating in the special education process.

**Latino Parents’ Experiences with the Special Education Process**

IDEA establishes that schools must consider parents equal participants in the educational decision-making process. Nevertheless, parental participation in the special education process is often diminished by educators’ expectations of some degree of parental expertise regarding disabilities and special education regulations that is comparable to that of special education professionals (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). First-generation immigrant Latino parents are at a significant disadvantage since they are unlikely to possess sufficient knowledge about the legal aspects of special education. Understanding parental rights may be particularly difficult for parents who have recently arrived in the country. Parents with low levels of proficiency in the English language may have difficulty accessing information regarding the mechanisms of the American education system and local school regulations (Langdon, 2009).

Salas (2004) studied the experiences of 10 Mexican-American mothers during IEP meetings. Salas found that Mexican-American mothers wanted to participate more in the IEP process, but their attempts were often blocked by issues related to language alienation and disrespect on the part of school personnel. The participants expressed that schools’ (unofficial) English-only policies often made them feel ashamed of and frustrated by their inability to get educators to listen to them. In addition, these mothers worried about confronting school personnel because of possible retaliation against their children. They felt disrespected by school personnel’s condescending behaviors towards them, related to parents’ inability to communicate in English, and believed that their opinions were not valued among educators.
The Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires that schools communicate to parents with limited English proficiency the same information that is communicated to parents who are English proficient. Similarly, Executive Order 13166 requires that recipients of Federal financial assistance ensure access by individuals with limited English proficiency. In addition, IDEA requires that schools implement effective strategies to reach and serve all parents of children with disabilities. In the case of parents with limited English proficiency, schools should provide language interpretation services to ensure that parents understand the different aspects of their children’s education and/or provide written documentation in the parents’ preferred language.

However, research has shown that the lack of qualified interpreters often creates misunderstandings between parents and school personnel due to interpreters’ lack of professional knowledge and vocabulary regarding special education issues, limited understanding of the family’s culture, and the execution of omissions and additions that distort the meaning of the message being communicated by school professionals and/or parents (Cheatham, 2010). These interpreting errors can shape first-generation Latino parents’ perceptions of the special education system and, in a way, determine parents’ willingness and capacity to participate in the special education process. In fact, beyond just causing confusion between parents and school personnel, communication issues related to parent’s limited English language proficiency may have a negative effect on these parents’ perception of the special education process. Thus, even if the school’s intention may be to offer at least some language support to parents with limited English language skills, the potential harm caused by unqualified interpreters or translators may actually decrease opportunities for future parent participation and parent-school collaboration.

Kozleski et al., (2008) reported that Latino parents of children receiving special services believed that, even though schools performed relevant assessments to understand their children’s
needs better, school professionals often failed to explain the evaluation process to the families in ways that they could understand. As a result, parents felt disempowered and unable to participate in the process. Although Latino families recognized the importance of parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities, Hughes et al. (2008) found that a third of Latino parents (n=16) participating in a study did not demand more from special education professionals due to feelings of inadequacy. Such feelings were usually related to their limited English language skills and low educational levels.

Parents’ immigration status is another factor that may negatively impact Latino parental involvement in the special education process. School districts are prohibited by federal law (i.e. Titles IV and V of the Civil Rights Act) to discriminate against school age children and their parents on the basis of race, color, or national origin (http://www.justice.gov/crt/edo). In addition, the Supreme Court has forbidden schools to request personal information, such as social security number or race/ethnicity, with the purpose of denying access to public schools (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education Dear Colleague Letter, May 2011). However, many undocumented immigrants see school staff as government officials who are accountable for enforcing immigration laws. Fear of being exposed to immigration authorities by school personnel causes some undocumented parents to limit their participation in school activities that require them to provide personal identification documentation (Olivos, 2009).

Finally, in a study comparing the perceived needs of Latino and Anglo-American parents (n=19) of children with visual impairments by Dote-Kwan, Chen, and Hughes (2009), Latino mothers expressed a greater need for information about their children’s conditions and disabilities. Also, half of the Latino mothers in the study needed assistance explaining their children’s condition to family members. The greater need for support expressed by Latino
parents may be a reflection of the multiple challenges they face to participate in the special education process. Together, the unique circumstances of Latino parents may indeed create additional obstacles to the ones encountered by non-Latino parents when participating in the special education process. Some of these issues might derive from a low sense of self-efficacy resulting from their limited understanding of the American education system and communication issues (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002).

School personnel must reassess the way they communicate with Latino families as well as their expectations for Latino parental participation in the special education process. Educators need to accept that their ideal of parental involvement may not be feasible for some of the Latino parents with whom they work. Regardless of the reasons explaining the limited investigations of issues related to Latinos in special education, it is crucial for scholars and practitioners alike to identify and understand the challenges faced by Latino parents of children with disabilities when participating in the special education process. Special education professionals need to find solutions to these problems in order to ensure parental participation and adequate education for Latino students receiving special education services.

**Educators’ Actions that Promote Parental Participation in the Special Education Process**

Collaboration between schools and parents of children who receive special education services is essential to ensure appropriate selection, planning, and implementation of individualized educational goals for students with disabilities. Fish (2008) provided some general guidelines for increasing parents’ participation during IEP meetings, which could in turn improve parental participation in all aspects of the special education process. According to Fish, special education professionals must treat parents as equal participants and, if necessary, encourage them to bring an advocate who is knowledgeable about the IEP and special education
procedures to the meeting. Also, before meetings, teachers should provide parents with a copy of the goals being considered for the student to reduce parents’ feelings of uncertainty about the meeting and allow them time to develop questions. During meetings, school personnel should adhere to proper IEP protocols to avoid confusion or even suspicions of inappropriate practices. Educators should abstain themselves from making decisions, determining educational and behavioral goals in the absence of the parents, or completing forms before parents arrive. Likewise, schools should make an effort to educate parents about special education laws and to connect them with appropriate resources.

In addition, when working with Latinos and other culturally and linguistically diverse students, schools could increase the number of bilingual staff who are familiar with students’ cultures in order to promote communication with the families (Ramirez, 2003). According to Olivos (2009) educators should avoid portraying the attitude that school is always right, limit professional jargon and excessive reference to legal mandates, and select a person in the IEP team to be in charge of developing a closer relationship with parents and facilitate parents’ communication with the rest of the team. Finally, educators must keep in mind that the cultural construction of disability cannot be interpreted in ways that support ethnic or cultural stereotypes (Harry, 2002). Therefore, they should find out where the family stands on certain issues instead of assuming that they share the school’s view of the child’s disability and the utility of the proposed educational program.

Conceptual Framework

Research findings presented in this literature review suggest a relationship between parental participation in the special education process and multiple parent and school-related factors. However, there has been a lack of research studies specifically designed to explore this
relationship in depth. Most studies have examined the challenges faced by Latino or non-Latino parents of students with disabilities while navigating the special education system, but they have failed to evaluate how experiences compare within these two populations. This phenomenon is particularly evident in regards to immigrant Latinos, limiting the analysis of the role that cultural and linguistic issues have in shaping the participation of first-generation immigrant Latino parents in the special education process. In addition to the situations and experiences reported by parents of children with disabilities, first-generation immigrants face unique circumstances that differentiate them from non-Latino and non-immigrant parents. Educators must understand how these parents’ experiences influence their participation in the special education process in order to increase collaboration with first-generation immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities.

Based on the research findings discussed in this review of the literature, a conceptual framework has been developed to explain the issues influencing the participation in the special education process among first-generation immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities. The framework utilizes a three-set Venn diagram (see Figure 1) to illustrate the logical relationships between the different sets of experiences affecting the participation of first-generation immigrant Latino parents in the special education process.

Venn diagrams were introduced by John Venn in 1880. They were initially referred to as “Eurelian Circles”. Venn diagrams became part of set theory instruction in the 1960s (Ruskey & Weston, 2005). Ever since, Venn diagrams have become increasingly popular in other fields of study such as reading and the sciences. They are often used to facilitate instruction in different subjects from elementary to higher education (Coleman, 2010; Sackes, Trundle, & Flevares, 2009). Venn diagrams are constructed using a series of overlapping simple closed curves, such
as circles and ovals, drawn on a plane. The interior of each closed curve embodies the elements of a set, and the exterior represents elements that are not part of that particular set. The overlapping area between sets (intersection) represents elements that share traits from all interconnecting sets.

In this conceptual framework, the sets included in the Venn diagram represent issues or experiences presumably influencing first-generation immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities. These experiences have been drawn from a body of literature suggesting the existence of multiple school and parent-related factors that affect parental involvement in special education. As illustrated in figure 1, set A of this framework represents the four categories of factors that influence all parents’ participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities. These factors include parents’ knowledge of the American education system, parent-school communication, parents’ perception of school personnel, and parents’ perception of their own role in the education of their children.

Set B represents situations frequently experienced by parents of children with disabilities. These situations are related to the overarching factors contained in set A. For example, some of the issues that illustrate parents’ knowledge of the American education system among parents of children with disabilities comprise parents’ understanding of the special education laws and procedures, IEP process, and their child’s disability (Fish, 2006, 2008; Span et al., 2003). Regarding the role of parent-school communication in parental participation in the special education process, the literature indicates the importance of parents’ ability to effectively communicate with school personnel about important aspects of their child’s disability and/or educational programming (Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller et al., 2008). This ability to communicate effectively with school personnel facilitates parents’ active participation
in the process for themselves and secures appropriate services for their children. Likewise, parents’ perception of school personnel includes parents’ expectations of school personnel in regards to the services they provide and the way they relate to children with disabilities and their families (Hughes et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010; Zionts et al., 2003). Finally, parents’ perception of their own role in their children’s education mainly refers to parents’ view of their role in the decision-making process. It is highly influenced by parents’ cultural beliefs about parent-school interaction and advocacy styles (Trainor, 2010a,b).

Each of the aforementioned factors can be directly or indirectly influenced by the others. The impact that they have on non-Latino parents’ participation in the special education process also applies to Latino parents. Nevertheless, when referring to first-generation immigrant Latino parents, each factor may involve additional issues resulting from the unique characteristics and life circumstances of Latinos in the United States.

Set C of this framework includes experiences faced by many Latino parents. One of such issues is Latino parents’ poor understanding of American education laws and procedures. Latino parents’ limited knowledge about the American education system is often evidenced in their lack of information about education laws and local school policies (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002; Bailey et al., 1999; Hill & Torres, 2010; Olivos, 2009). In addition, many Latinos in the United States have limited English language communication skills (Langdon, 2009; Salas, 2004), which decreases their ability to communicate with school personnel. Limited English language proficiency often prevents Latino parents from expressing their concerns about their children’s education, diminishing their ability to actively participate in educational decisions concerning their children. Latino parents may rely on untrained interpreters (e.g. relatives, friends, their own children) to interact with teachers and school administrators. The excessive
reliance on inadequate interpreting services is frequently a cause of ineffective communication and misunderstandings between Latino parents and school personnel (Cheatham, 2010).

Latino parents’ limited knowledge or understanding of the American culture may also have a negative impact in their interaction with school personnel, making parent-school collaboration more difficult. Latino parents’ understanding of the American culture, or lack thereof, influences their perception of the appropriateness of school personnel’s decisions regarding their children’s education (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Trainor, 2010, a). Likewise, Latino parents’ perception of school personnel’s cultural competence affects their impressions of school personnel’s ability to understand their expectations for their children (Harry, 1992; Hughes et al., 2008). A perception of low cultural competence within the school environment may generate feelings of uneasiness among Latino parents. Thus, Latino parents who believe that school personnel do not understand their cultural differences may choose to limit their interaction with educators. Also related to cultural diversity and competence is parents’ understanding of school’s culture and expectations. For example, many Latino parents have reported viewing educators as experts (Hughes et al., 2008; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001). This culturally influenced view of school-personnel impacts parental involvement among Latinos and challenges schools’ views on the role of parents in the education of children with disabilities.

Finally, the intersection between sets B and C represents first-generation immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities. These parents experience the same situations described by parents of children with disabilities as well as the cultural and linguistic barriers faced by many Latino parents of children without disabilities attending American schools. The combination of experiences faced by first-generation immigrant Latino parents also fall within the four overarching categories represented in set A. This conceptual framework suggests that
participating in the special education process could be an extremely complex task for first-generation Latino immigrant parents. For example, many first-generation immigrant Latino parents must learn how to navigate the special education system at the same time that they acquire basic English language skills, learn about the host culture, and deal with the emotional and social stress that accompanies the immigration process. Also, cultural differences regarding expectations of parental involvement and advocacy may become overwhelming for parents who have not had time to learn about the American education system and school culture yet. Finally, the complexity of the circumstances faced by first-generation immigrant Latino parents’ complicates their access to information about their children’s educational needs and the special education system.
Figure 1. Venn diagram illustrating the conceptual framework for explaining the parent and school-related factors influencing first-generation immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process.
Summary

Parental participation in the special education process is influenced by parents’ knowledge and understanding of special education laws and procedures, advocacy skills, and perception of the special education system. Parents of children with disabilities often face challenges in areas related to participation in the IEP process, communication and collaboration with school professionals, and satisfaction with special education services.

For first-generation immigrant Latino parents, the already complicated special education scene becomes even more challenging due to cultural and linguistic differences impacting their understanding, perceptions, and responses to the expectation of parental advocacy. Latino parents’ participation in the education of their children with disabilities may be hindered by their limited English-language proficiency and lack of familiarity with the American education system. Latino parents’ understanding of the special education process is influenced by their cultural perceptions of disabilities and the roles of parents and teachers. Latino parents’ tendency to favor collective over individual goals is likely to affect their perception of American special education principles, which focus on developing independence and rely on the concepts of parent and student advocacy skills. Thus, to increase parental involvement among first-generation immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities, educators must understand Latino values and beliefs regarding education, minimize the barriers faced by first-generation immigrant parents while navigating the special education system, and help Latino parents understand their role in the special education process.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology used in this study. It incorporates subsections explaining the purpose, research questions, participant selection criteria, recruitment process, instrument development and reliability analysis, data collection plan, sample characteristics, methods of data analysis, and limitations of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences that first-generation, immigrant Latino parents have while navigating the American special education system and to identify the factors that influence their participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities. To achieve this goal, situations faced by all parents of children with disabilities, as well as issues affecting Latino parents in the United States, were examined. Parents’ experiences were theoretically divided into general categories, which comprised parents’ knowledge of the American education system, general parent-school communication, parents’ perception of school personnel, and parents’ perception of their own role in the education of their children. In addition, Latino parents’ experiences related to English language communication skill were considered.

Research Questions

This study was based on the idea that parent participation in their children’s special education process is not only a parental right but also a fundamental contributor to the educational success of students with special needs. However, parental participation can be influenced by a myriad of experiences faced by parents of children with disabilities. To evaluate the role that such experiences have in shaping the participation of first-generation immigrant
Latino parents in the special education process, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1- What experiences do immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities, ages 3-12, have when navigating the American special education system?

2- How do the experiences faced by immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities, ages 3-12, influence their participation in the special education process?

**Participants**

**Population of Interest**

In this study, the population of interest was first-generation immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities residing in the state of Louisiana. Latinos constitute 16.7% of the United States population and 4.4% of the Louisiana population (US Census Bureau, 2010). Sixty-five percent of Latinos living in Louisiana are first-generation immigrants; the majority of Latino immigrants in Louisiana are originally from Central America (47%), Mexico (35%), South America (7%), and the Caribbean (9%).

In regards to their educational level, about 39% of foreign-born Latinos in Louisiana have less than a high school diploma; 34% completed high school, 15% have some college education, and 12% have a college degree or more (http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/states/pdf/LA_10.pdf). About 22,238 (4%) students enrolled in Louisiana public schools are of Latino descent. Six percent of Louisiana public school students speak a language other than English at home, but only 1.8% of students have limited English language proficiency. Among children of immigrants, 55% have parents who have difficulty speaking English (kidscount.org/base/bystate/stateprofile.aspx?state=LA&group).
In addition, 7% of Latino students attending Louisiana public schools receive special education compared to the 11.8% of the general student population. Latino students comprise approximately 1.9% of students receiving special education services in the state of Louisiana (http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/uploads/17927.pdf). Among the Latino students (ages 3-21) receiving special education or related services in Louisiana, the most prevalent disabilities are speech and language impairment (34%), specific learning disabilities (28%), developmental delay (10%), other health impairments (9%), intellectual disabilities (6%), and autism (4%).

**Selection Criteria**

Selection criteria for this study included parents who: a) were born in, Mexico, Central and South America, Puerto Rico or other Caribbean countries, b) were raised in Spanish speaking families originating from the abovementioned countries, c) spoke Spanish at home or with close relatives and friends, and d) had children (ages 3-12) with disabilities receiving special education and/or related services, under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), or had children (3 years of age) with disabilities who received early intervention and/or disability related service, under Part C of IDEA, for at least one school year prior to placement in special education.

Thus, for the purpose of this study, the term *Latino parents of children with disabilities* referred to immigrants of Latino heritage currently residing in the state of Louisiana, whose children (ages 3 to 12) had an educational disability diagnosis and received special education and/or related services at the time of data collection. The term *non-Latino parents* referred to American-born parents of non-Latino backgrounds whose children (ages 3 to 12) had been diagnosed with an educational disability and received special education and/or related services.
These definitions were used to delineate the participant selection criteria established for this study.

**Recruitment**

Prior to participant recruitment, institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained from the University of New Orleans. Research materials, including approved IRB form (see Appendix A), survey, and informational flyers, were submitted to collaborating school districts, disability-related agencies, and community organizations.

A variety of methods were used to solicit Latino parents’ participation in this study. First, collaborating gatekeepers from different local and state level disability-related agencies emailed an invitation to participate in the study to parents of children with disabilities in their data bases. This email contained information about the study written in English (see Appendix B) and Spanish (see Appendix C). Contact information for participants who emailed the researcher directly was handled with high levels of confidentiality and kept in a password protected laptop.

Moreover, four Louisiana public school systems sent Spanish-written flyers about the study (see Appendix D) to all self-identified Latino or Hispanic parents of 3 to 12-year-olds receiving special education services in their districts. One of the school districts included a copy of the survey with the flyer and offered parents the option of completing surveys at home and returning them to their child’s school. Furthermore, flyers were posted and distributed among local clinics and English-as-a-second language (ESL) learning centers as well as Latino/Hispanic business, associations, and churches in several Louisiana Parishes. Information about the study was shared during four meetings and workshops for Spanish-speaking parents sponsored by local parent advocacy agencies and parent community liaisons. Likewise, information was
disseminated through two local Spanish-language television and radio programs, two bilingual community newspapers, and the Latino section of a English-language newspaper with outreach to several Louisiana parishes. Finally, potential participants were referred to the researcher by other participants and community connections.

Throughout all recruitment efforts, potential participants were provided with the researcher’s contact information. They were encouraged to contact the researcher to receive further information about the study. To protect the identity of potential participants, parents’ contact information was kept in a safe place and destroyed after parents completed the survey. Potential participants were offered the choice to receive and return the survey via regular mail or to complete the survey during a one-on-one session with the researcher or, in some cases, the agency’s bilingual staff member serving as a gatekeeper. In addition, potential participants who contacted the researcher directly were screened to verify qualification criteria before scheduling a meeting to complete the survey.

Participants who chose to have the survey mailed were contacted by telephone within two weeks of delivery to confirm that they had received the package and remind them to complete the survey. Written reminders (see Appendix E) were mailed on week 4 after the initial survey package had been sent. Once the completed survey was received, a thank-you note (Appendix F) and Wal-Mart card was mailed to the participants.

Possible reluctance to participate in this study due to issues related to immigration status was addressed by assuring parents that information regarding their legal status would not be collected. Also, parents were informed that only information relevant to this study would be collected and that their personal information would be kept confidential, as required by IRB procedures (http://humansubjects.uno.edu/, Retrieved on 09/21/11). Gatekeepers at the different
agencies were asked to convey this message to all potential participants. This message was reiterated by the researcher by including a written statement about confidentiality at the beginning of the instructions section in the survey.

Possible issues related to limited English language proficiency were addressed by making surveys available to parents in English and Spanish. Likewise, to address issues of limited literacy skills, survey-reading assistance in Spanish and/or English was offered to all participants and provided upon request. Survey-reading assistance involved reading survey directions and questions to participants who chose to complete the survey during an in-person meeting with the researcher or a staff member from one of the collaborating agencies or schools. Wal-Mart shopping cards with the value of $20.00 were offered as an incentive for participating in this study and hand-delivered or mailed to participants upon completion of the survey. Parents’ return of the survey was considered consent to participate in this study. Participation in this study was completely voluntary.

Sample

Prior to conducting any statistical analysis, the data collected for this study were checked for errors. One participant was eliminated because the child received special education services for children with gifted/talented abilities, and not due to a disability; two additional participants were rejected because they had been born in the United States. In the end, a purposive sample of 50 immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities was used in this study. Forty-six participants were female and 4 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, sixteen (32%) were from Mexico, four (8%) were from South America, and four (8%) were from the Caribbean (2 Cuban and 2 Puerto Rican). Both Puerto Rican participants were born in the island,
had lived in the continental United States for five years or less, and spoke Spanish as their primary language.

This sample distribution was similar to the proportion by country of origin reported for the Latino population in Louisiana. Moreover, twelve (24%) participants completed high school; eleven (22%) had some college education, and eleven (22%) had college or higher. Of the sixteen (32%) participants who did not complete high school, one had never been to school, 10 had up to six years of schooling, and five had completed middle school. The number of years that participants had lived in the United States ranged from 4 to 43 years (M=13.18, SD= 9.12).

Moreover, of the 50 participants’ children who had a disability, thirty-five were male and 15 were female. The age of the children ranged from 3 to 12 years (M= 6.44, SD= 1.67). The average age of the children at the time of placement in special education was 4.06 years (SD= 1.67). Fifteen children (30%) had speech/language disorders, thirteen (26%) had autism spectrum disorders, and twenty-two (44%) had other disabilities (specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, other health impairment, multiple disabilities, hearing impairment, visual impairment, and traumatic brain injury). Finally, nine of the 50 participants had more than one child who had been diagnosed with a disability. An equal number of them (n=3) had a child with language and speech disorders, autism, and other disabilities. Data about the second child’s disability and age were not collected. Thirty-eight (76%) participants reported that their children qualified for free or reduced school meals. Participants’ children received special education services in 11 different school districts throughout Louisiana, including most of the districts servicing the highest percentage of Latino students in the state. Detailed information about the demographic characteristics of the sample is provided in Table 1.
### Table 1

**Demographic Information**

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<th>SD</th>
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Table 1 continued

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<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>13.18</td>
<td>9.13</td>
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<td>6.44</td>
<td>2.70</td>
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<td>Specific Learning Disabilities</td>
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<td>Age of the child at the time of the first IEP</td>
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<td>1.67</td>
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<td>Parent has more than one child with a disability</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18.00</td>
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Instrumentation

Research studies have identified some of the situations that parents of children with disabilities encounter when navigating the special education system and dealing with school personnel (Fish, 2006, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller et al., 2008; Span et al., 2003; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010; Zionts et al., 2003). However, none of these studies have systematically investigated the impact that such experiences have on parental participation in the special education process. Furthermore, research has failed to systematically examine the effect of demographic variables (parent’s age, educational and socio-economic levels, length of time living in the United States, child’s age, child’s disability, child’s age at the time of diagnosis and number of years in special education) on the way that such factors influence Latino parents’ participation in the special education process.

Several studies have utilized qualitative research designs involving open interviews with parents to explore Latino parents’ experiences with the special education system (e.g., Bailey et al., 1999; Harry, 1992; Hughes et al., 2008; Salas, 2004). Also, a few studies have used surveys to inquire about Latino parent’ interaction with school personnel and/or satisfaction with special education services (e.g., Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Olmstead et al., 2010). Nevertheless, none of these studies have specifically examined the relationship between the experiences that Latino parents of children with disabilities report having while navigating the special education system and the participation of first-generation immigrant Latino parents in the special education process. Thus, there was a lack of research addressing the questions presented in this study.

A bilingual (English/ Spanish) survey was created to assess the impact that the multiple experiences faced by first-generation immigrant Latino parents have in their participation in the special education process. The items contained in the Special Education Parent Participation
Survey, SPED-PPS, (see Appendices G and H) explore several issues related to Latino parents’ participation in the special education process, including (a) whether Latino parents of children with disabilities have similar experiences to those reported by non-Latino parents of children receiving special education, (b) characteristics of Latino parents’ participation in the special education process, (c) the role of cultural issues in Latino parents’ participation in the special education process, (d) the impact of English language communication skills on Latino parents’ participation in the special education process, (e) the association between Latino parents’ understanding of the American culture and their participation in the special education process.

All items included in the survey represent parent and school-related issues that have been found in previous research studies to affect parent participation in the special education process (Hughes et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Ramirez, 2003). In addition, cultural and linguistic issues reported by Latino parents were included (Kalyanput et al., 2008; Olmstead et al., 2001; Perreira et al., 2006; Ramirez, 2003).

Instrument Development Process

The development of the SPED-PPS involved a series of steps. First, this instrument was developed in English. To increase the validity of the survey, research findings from studies conducted in related areas were utilized as the foundation for items 4, 9, and 11-35, which address situations and experiences encountered by parents while participating in the special education process. Then an expert panel including eight professionals from the fields of special education, English as a second language, bilingual counseling, and parent advocacy assessed the face validity of the survey items. Moreover, two English speaking parents of children with disabilities reviewed the survey questions for clarity. Changes to the survey were made in response to the feedback received from the expert panel and parents.
To create a Spanish version of the SPED-PPS, a combination of the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970) with decentering (emphasis in cultural meaning rather than literal translation) and multiple forward translation (several interpreters translate the original instrument) was followed. This combined approach was chosen since it allows for culturally relevant changes from the source language (English) to the target language (Spanish) in order to more accurately represent the constructs being translated (Erkut, 2010). Accordingly, all items included in the original (English) version of the survey were translated into the Spanish language by two proficient bilingual speakers and readers. Then two different, but equally proficient, Spanish-English bilingual interpreters were translated the Spanish version of the survey back into English to verify the accuracy of the first translation. The multiple versions of the survey translations were compared, and differences among all the reviewed versions were discussed by another interpreter and the researcher until a consensus was reached and a final version of the survey was developed (Cha, Kim, & Erlen, 2007). To minimize cultural and linguistic biases, individuals originating from different Latin American countries were selected to serve as interpreters and members of the bilingual expert panel.

An expert panel of Bilingual English-Spanish educators, counselors, and parent advocates assessed the instrument for face validity and cultural appropriateness. Subsequently, a group of Latino parents reviewed the Spanish version of the survey for clarity. Necessary adjustments to the vocabulary used in the survey were made in response to the expert panel’s review of both, English and Spanish, versions of the instrument. This process was followed to ensure that all items were interpreted in the same manner by participants completing the survey in either language.
Instrument Description

**SPED-PPS – Parent Participation in the Special Education Process Section.** Items number 1-3, 5-8, and 10 of the survey measured the level of parental participation in the special education process, as defined in this study. The level of parental participation in the special education process included the frequency and quality of parents’ participation in all the decisions made during IEP meetings, as well as their on-going collaboration with school staff between IEP meetings. All items in this section provided four answer choices (0= Never, 1= Rarely, 2= Frequently; 3= Always), which were intended to measure the frequency with which participation in the special education process occurs. To examine the characteristics of parental participation in the special education process, items 1, 2, 3, and 5 of this section asked about parental participation outside the IEP meeting and items 6, 7, 8, and 10 asked parents to describe their participation in the IEP meeting.

**SPED-PPS Parent Experiences Section.** Items number 4, 9, and11-35 referred to experiences that may impact parents’ participation in the educational decisions concerning their children with disabilities. These items were based on issues identified in the literature as being either helpful or problematic for parents of children with disabilities (see Appendix I). Items 12, 13, 19, 25, 30, and 31 inquired about parents’ knowledge of the American education system, including general procedures as well as special education services and programs (Hughes et al., 2008; Olmstead et al., 2010; Perreira et al., 2006). Items 11, 14, 17, 20, 22, and 26 addressed general issues related to parent-school communication (Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Ramirez, 2003). Items 15, 18, 21, 23, 28, 29, 34, and 35 asked about parents’ perception of school personnel (Hughes et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Ramirez, 2003). Items 16, 24, 32, and 33 addressed parents’ perceptions of their own role in the education of their children’s education.
(Kalyanpur et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Ramirez, 2003). Finally, items 4, 9, and 27 asked about parents’ English language communication skills (Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Ramirez, 2003).

In addition, for the purpose of this study, a demographic information section was attached to the survey. This section included 10 questions designed to collect information about the characteristics of the participants and their children. Information was gathered about parent’s gender, age, educational level, household income (as measured by free or reduced school lunch status), and length of time living in the United States. Regarding the children with disabilities, the items in this section asked about the child’s age, gender, age at the time of the first IEP, and special education disability classification. The demographic information collected in this section assisted in the analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings (e.g., determining the generalizability of the findings).

**Instrument Reliability**

A basic assumption of this study was that the instrument designed to survey participants was valid and accurately measured parents’ participation in the children’s special education process as well as the experiences they faced while navigating the special education system. However, to confirm this assumption, a reliability analysis was conducted to measure the survey’s internal consistency (Vogt, 2007). A single-administration method was used to determine the accuracy and precision of the SPED-PPS. The 35 items included in the survey were grouped into six scales. The first scale comprised items 1-3, 5-8, and 10, which were designed to measure the quality and quantity of parental participation in the special education process. Items 4, 9, and 11-35 were designed to measure parents’ experiences while navigating the special education system; they were divided into five scales according to the content domains.
identified during the review of the literature conducted in preparation for this study. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated to measure the internal consistency of each scale. In accordance to conventional guidelines, a Cronbach’s alpha level of .70 was used to determine the statistical significance of all correlations (Vogt, 2007). Items that did not fit within a scale, or that significantly lowered the alpha coefficient for a particular scale, were eliminated.

Cronbach’s coefficient alpha tests revealed weak correlations and low levels of internal consistency in the scales intended to measure general parent-school communication (α= 0.44) and parents’ perception of their own role in their child’s education (α= 0.15). These results suggested that the items in each of these scales were unlikely to measure the same latent variable. Therefore, they could not be treated as factors in any statistical analyses. Also, results from the internal reliability analysis showed that, after removing item 8, the alpha level for parent participation in the special education process increased from 0.80 to 0.86. Similarly, an increase (from 0.79 to 0.85) in the alpha coefficient for the parents’ understanding of the American education system scale occurred after removing item 31. Further revision of items 8 and 31 confirmed that neither item was essential to their respective content domains. Therefore, to ensure the highest level of internal consistency within each scale, the decision to eliminate items 8 and 31 was made.

Cronbach coefficient alphas for parents’ participation in their children’s special education process (α= 0.86), parents’ knowledge of the American education system (α= 0.85), parents’ perception of school personnel (α= 0.71), and parents’ English language communication skills (α= 0.84), indicated a strong correlation among the items included in each scale. Thus, these four scales were treated as factors in further inferential statistical analysis. Results for the SPED-PPS reliability analysis are summarized in Table 2.
Table 2  
*Results from the instrument reliability analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Questions Removed</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent participation in their children's special education process.</td>
<td>1- I visit, call or send notes about my child to school.</td>
<td>8- At the IEP meeting, I let the teachers make most of the decisions about my child’s education.</td>
<td>0.86*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2- I tell teachers when I have a concern about my child.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3- I ask teachers about school activities and events.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5- I speak with teachers about my child’s progress.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6- I attend my child’s IEP meetings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7- I tell teachers when I disagree with their decisions about programs and services for my child.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10- The teachers and I make decisions together about what is best for my child.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ knowledge of the American education system</td>
<td>12- I understand how special education programs work.</td>
<td>31- I receive information about activities and events happening at my child’s school.</td>
<td>0.85*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13- I know about the special education services available to my child.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19- I think I know a lot about my child’s disability.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25- I understand how American schools work.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30- I understand what I am supposed to do during IEP meetings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-school communication</td>
<td>11- School personnel communicate with me regularly about my child’s needs and progress.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14- Somebody at school explains the information discussed at the IEP meeting in a way I can understand.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17- I have enough opportunities to communicate with my child’s teachers between IEP meetings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20- I receive invitations to visit my child’s school for different events, not just IEP meetings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22- Having so many professionals present at the IEP meeting makes me uncomfortable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26- I have problems understanding the information shared in the IEP meetings.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Questions Removed</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Parent’s perception of school personnel | 15- School personnel pay attention to my opinions about what my child needs.  
18- School personnel have a positive attitude towards my child and my family.  
21- I feel that the teachers speak down to me.  
23- I trust all the teachers working with my child.  
28- The teachers and I expect the same things from my child.  
29- Teachers understand my family’s culture or lifestyle.  
34- Teachers give me suggestions about how I can help my child at home.  
35- School personnel support my initiative to invite friends or relatives to my child’s IEP meetings for additional support. |                     | 0.71*    |
| Parents’ English Language Communication Skills | 4- I speak with my child’s teachers in English.  
9- I use an interpreter to communicate with school staff during IEP meetings.  
27- I feel uncomfortable asking questions because of my limited English |                     | 0.84*    |
| Parents’ perception of their own role in their child’s education | 16- I believe that my child’s teachers may think that I am interfering too much with their work with my child.  
24- I don’t want teachers to think that I am being disrespectful.  
32- I think that teachers know best about my child’s needs.  
33- I find it difficult to confront school personnel about my child’s educational needs. |                     | 0.15     |

*Note.* *= significant correlation

**Data Collection**

Data were confidentially collected through the SPED-PPS. Thirty-two surveys were completed during one-on-one meetings with the researcher, and seven surveys were completed during meetings with a bilingual special education coordinator from a local school district. Of
the 11 participants that completed surveys at home, nine returned them to their children’s schools and two mailed them back to the researcher. Forty-seven of the 50 participants completed the survey in Spanish. Participants were asked to complete all 35 questions of the SPED-PPS as well as the Demographic Information section. Space was provided for parents who wished to share additional information about their experiences while participating in their children’s special education process. Of the 35 participants who chose to complete this section, 16 participants wrote their comments at the end of the survey; 19 participants verbally related their experiences for the researcher to write down. Survey data were entered anonymously in data collection sheets.

Data Analysis

After correcting the data, 50 surveys were used for data analysis. The maximum missing number of responses for any particular demographic variable was four; the maximum number of missing responses per survey item was two. Similarly, the maximum number of missing responses per participant was four in the demographic section and two in the SPED-PPS. No systematically missing data were found; all missing data appeared random. Therefore, none of the participants were eliminated due to excessive missing data. Pairwise deletion analysis was used. Survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. All statistical analyses were done using the Statistical Analysis System or SAS (9.2 version).

Research Question 1

Survey data as well as qualitative data from the Comments section of the survey were used to determine the experiences that participants in this study had while navigating the special education system.
**Descriptive statistics.** To determine the degree to which participants experienced the situations included in the SPED-PPS, descriptive statistics were calculated. Frequency distributions (f, percentages) were reported for items 4, 9, and 11-35 of the survey. In addition, overall measures of central tendency (mean) and variability (standard deviation) were calculated for the three scales that showed appropriate levels of internal consistency in the reliability analysis: parents’ knowledge of the American education system, parents’ perception of school personnel, and parents’ English language communication skills. Tables were created to facilitate the analysis of the data.

**Analysis of qualitative data.** To identify emerging themes, information collected in the optional *Comments* section of the survey was analyzed following the procedures recommended by Creswell (2007). First, an open coding system was implemented to segment parents’ comments. Next, parents’ comments were assigned to emerging categories according to common properties. Then a more detailed analysis of the data was conducted to identify possible factors contributing to the occurrence of the situations described by participants as well as participants’ responses to those situations. In addition, participants’ comments were examined to identify potential contextual and intervening conditions influencing parents’ responses to the situations they experienced while participating in their child’s special education process. Finally, parents’ comments were grouped into thematic categories and summarized.

**Research Question 2**

Inferential statistics were used to examine how Latino parents’ experiences influenced their participation in their children’s special education process. An alpha level of $p \leq .05$ was used to determine the statistical significance of the results from all inferential statistics. Two multiple regression models were developed. The first regression measured the ability of parents’
knowledge of the American education system, parents’ perception of school personnel, and parents’ English language communication skills to predict the participation of Latino parents in the special education process. Effects sizes for each statistically significant relationship were calculated.

Additional inferential analyses were performed with survey items 16, 24, 32, and 33, which had been initially design to assess parents’ perception of their own role in their children’s education. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were calculated to evaluate mean differences in parent participation in the special education process between participants who never/rarely or frequently/always experienced the situations represented in each individual item. In addition, Chi square statistics were computed to test for associations between selected demographic variables and the items found to have a statistically significant relationship with parental participation in the special education process. See Table 3 for a summary of the dependent and independent variables involved in each of the statistical tests conducted for this study.
Table 3

Summary of Statistical Analysis Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Dependent Variable Name</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Independent Variable Name</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Statistical Procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td>Parent participation in the special education process</td>
<td>1-3, 5-7, 10</td>
<td>Knowledge of American education system</td>
<td>SPED-PPS # 12, 13, 19, 25, 30</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics: frequencies M, SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of school personnel</td>
<td>SPED-PPS # 15, 18, 21, 23, 28, 29, 34, 35</td>
<td>Multiple regression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>English language communication skills</td>
<td>SPED-PPS # 4, 9, 27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Educational level</td>
<td>Demo # 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Length of time living in the United States</td>
<td>Demo # 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child’s disability</td>
<td>Demo # 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Parent participation in the special education process</td>
<td>1-3, 5-7, 10</td>
<td>SPED-PPS # 16</td>
<td>ANOVA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SPED-PPS # 24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SPED-PPS # 32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SPED-PPS # 33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>Demo # 3</td>
<td>Chi-Square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Length of time living in the United States</td>
<td>Demo # 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child’s disability</td>
<td>Demo # 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

This chapter contained a description of the methodology used in this study. Quantitative methods were used to answer the research questions: 1) What experiences do immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities, ages 3-12, have when navigating the American special education system? and 2) How do the experiences faced by immigrant Latino parents of children
with disabilities, ages 3-12, influence their participation in the special education process? A researcher-developed survey was used to collect the data for this study. A reliability analysis was performed to measure the internal consistency of the survey. In addition, data analysis included the use of descriptive and inferential statistics to examine the characteristics of the sample and provide answers to the research questions guiding the study. This study provided additional information about first-generation immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process of their children with disabilities.
Chapter IV

Results

In this chapter, the factors that influence the participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process of their children with disabilities were explored. First, the experiences of Latino parents while navigating the American special education system were examined. Then, the impact of such experiences on parent participation in the special education process was evaluated. A 35-item researcher-developed, Likert-style questionnaire (Special Education Parent Participation Survey, or SPED-PPS) was used to collect the necessary data to answer the research questions presented in this study. To facilitate the interpretation of the findings, the information presented in this chapter has been divided into two primary sessions. Each section includes sub-sections describing the results from the statistical tests performed to answer a particular research question.

Experiences of Latino Parents When Navigating the American Special Education System

The first research question in this study asked what type of experiences that immigrant Latino parents have when navigating the special education system. To answer this question, descriptive statistics were used to analyze data gathered from items 4, 9, and 11-35 of the SPED-PPS. Questions 1-3, 5-7, and 10 were not included in this analysis since they examine the degree of parental participation in the special education process, rather than parents’ experiences with the special education system. Moreover, participants’ comments regarding their personal experiences while participating in their child’s special education process were analyzed.

Descriptive statistics. The descriptive analysis of the data was conducted in several steps. First, survey items were grouped according to the following content domains: parents’ knowledge of the American education system, general parent-school communication, parents’ perception of school personnel, parents’ English language skills, and parents’ perception of their
own role in the education of their children. Frequencies and percentages of participant responses were summarized and analyzed to determine how often each of the situations presented in the survey were experienced by participants. To facilitate the interpretation of the findings, participants’ answers were grouped into two categories: (a) the situation was experienced by the participant (Frequently/Always) and (b) the situation was not experienced by the participant (Never/Rarely). See Table 4 for a summary of participants’ responses.

Table 4

*Latino Parents Experiences while Navigating the Special Education System*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Never (f, %)</th>
<th>Rarely (f, %)</th>
<th>Frequently (f, %)</th>
<th>Always (f, %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I understand how special education programs work.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3 (6.00)</td>
<td>10 (20.00)</td>
<td>23 (46.00)</td>
<td>14 (28.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>I know about the special education services available to my child.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4 (8.16)</td>
<td>11 (22.45)</td>
<td>21 (42.86)</td>
<td>13 (26.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I think I understand my child’s disability.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1 (2.00)</td>
<td>7 (14.00)</td>
<td>10 (20.00)</td>
<td>32 (64.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>I understand how American schools work.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3 (6.12)</td>
<td>15 (30.61)</td>
<td>17 (34.69)</td>
<td>14 (28.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>I understand what I am supposed to do during IEP meetings.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2 (4.00)</td>
<td>6 (12.00)</td>
<td>19 (38.00)</td>
<td>23 (46.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Never f</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Rarely f</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequently f</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Always f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Somebody at school explains the information discussed at the IEP meeting in a way I can understand.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26.00</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I have enough opportunities to communicate with my child’s teachers between IEP meetings.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32.00</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I receive invitations to visit my child’s school for different events, not just IEP meetings.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>48.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Having so many professionals at the IEP meeting makes me uncomfortable.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60.00</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>I have problems understanding the information shared in the IEP meetings.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28.00</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36.00</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents ‘English language communication skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Never f</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Rarely f</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Frequently f</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Always f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I speak with my child’s teachers in English.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24.00</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I use an interpreter to communicate with school staff during IEP meetings.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>I feel uncomfortable asking questions because of my limited English.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Never f</th>
<th>Never %</th>
<th>Rarely f</th>
<th>Rarely %</th>
<th>Frequently f</th>
<th>Frequently %</th>
<th>Always f</th>
<th>Always %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>School personnel pay attention to my opinions about what my child needs.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>School personnel have a positive attitude towards my child and my family.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I feel that the teachers speak down to me.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>62.00</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
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<td>2.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>I trust all the teachers working with my child.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40.00</td>
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<td>52.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>The teachers and I expect the same things from my child.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38.00</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Teachers understand my family’s culture or lifestyle.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36.73</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.41</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Teachers give me suggestions about how I can help my child at home.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36.00</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>42.00</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>School personnel support my initiative to invite friends or relatives to my child’s IEP meetings for additional support.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26.00</td>
<td>23</td>
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Table 4 continued

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<th>Item #</th>
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<th>n</th>
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<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Always</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I believe that my child’s teachers may think that I am interfering too much with their work with my child.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>47.92</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>I don’t want teachers to think that I am being disrespectful.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52.00</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>I think that teachers know best about my child’s needs.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16.33</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>I find it difficult to confront school personnel about my child’s educational needs.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>44.00</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parents’ knowledge of the American education system.** Data showed that, of the 50 participants completing the survey, forty-two (84%) participants affirmed that they understood their children’s disabilities, received information about school activities and events, and understood what they were supposed to do during IEP meetings. Thirty-seven (74%) participants reported understanding how special education programs worked. In addition, of the 49 participants who answered items 13 and 25, thirty-one (63%) participants understood how American schools worked and thirty-four (69%) knew about special education services available to their children.

**Parent-school communication.** Regarding the general aspects of communication and collaboration with schools, forty-two (84%) participants reported that school personnel regularly...
communicated with them about their child’s needs and progress. Thirty-seven (74%) participants had enough opportunities to communicate with their child’s teachers between IEP meetings, and thirty-nine (78%) participants received invitations to visit the child’s school for different events, not just for the IEP meetings. Thirty-nine (78%) of participants said that somebody at school explained the information discussed at the IEP meeting in a way they could understand. However, eighteen (36%) participants still had problems understanding the information shared in the IEP meetings. Three (6%) participants felt uncomfortable having so many professionals at the IEP meeting.

**Parents’ perception of school personnel.** Forty-five (90%) participants reported that school personnel had a positive attitude towards their child and family, while six (12%) participants stated that teachers spoke down to them. Thirty-six (72%) participants had the support from school personnel to invite friends or relatives to the child’s IEP meetings. Forty-five (90%) participants shared teachers’ expectations for the child. Forty-one (82%) participants stated that school personnel paid attention to their opinions about their child’s needs, and forty-six (92%) trusted all the teachers working with their child. Thirty-nine (78%) participants received suggestions from teachers about how to help their child at home, and about half of participants (25 out of 49, 51%) thought that teachers understood their family’s culture or lifestyle.

**Parents’ English language communication skills.** Twenty-eight (56%) participants used the English language to communicate directly with their children’s teachers; twenty-seven (54%) participants used an interpreter to communicate with school staff during IEP meetings; and twenty-four (48%) felt uncomfortable asking questions because of their limited English skills.
Parents’ perception of their own role in their child’s education. Eighteen of 49 (36%) participants thought that teachers knew best about their child’s needs; eleven of 48 (22%) participants believed that their child’s teachers might think that they were interfering too much in their work with the child; fourteen (28%) participants did not want teachers to think that they were disrespectful; and thirteen (26%) participants had difficulty confronting school personnel about their child’s educational needs.

In summary, survey data showed that understanding how American schools operate and learning about the types of services available to children with disabilities were challenging areas for the Latino parents participating in this study. In addition, although a high percentage of participants had limited English language skills and relied on third parties to communicate with school personnel, the majority of parents did not experience major difficulties with general aspects of parent-school communication. Last, but not least, the majority of participants did not experience the culture-based issues regarding parents’ perception of their role in the child’s education that are often presumed to challenge the participation of Latino parents in their children’s education (e.g., believing that professionals know best about their children’s needs or worrying about teachers thinking that they -parents- are being disrespectful when they inquire about their children’s education).

To calculate means and standard deviations, the numerical value attached to participants’ responses (0= Never, 1= Rarely, 2= Frequently, 3= Always) was utilized. A score of 0 was interpreted as least desirable (absence of a positive experience in that area) while a score of 3 was interpreted as the most desirable response (regular occurrence of a positive experience in that area). Because items number 16, 21, 22, 24, 26, 32, and 33 stated situations that were considered challenges, the scores for these items were reversed to fit the response pattern
explained above. Means for all scales were computed per each individual participant. Then overall means and standard deviations per scale were computed (see Table 5).

Table 5

*Overall Means and Standard Deviations by Scale*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent participation in the special education process</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ knowledge of American education system</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ perception of school personnel</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ English communication skills</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.11</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Scores for the parent participation scale ($M= 2.26, SD= 0.65$) suggested that, on average, parents participated frequently and actively in their children special education process; however there was a great degree of variability in the amount of participation reported by participants. Mean scores for parents’ understanding of the American education system ($M= 2.13, \text{range}= 0.83–3.00$) and parents’ perception of school personnel ($M= 2.32, \text{range}= 1.00–3.00$) indicated that participants had a good understanding of how the American education system operates and a positive perception of school personnel working with their children. Parents’ English language communication skills ($M= 1.56, SD= 1.10, \text{range}= 0-3$) had the lowest mean score. Although the large standard deviation suggests a wide variability in the participants’ English language skills, the data showed that a good number of participants had difficulty communicating with school personnel in English.

**Participants’ comments.** Thirty-six of the 50 participants in this study offered additional comments about their experiences when navigating the special education system and
participating in their children’s special education process. Of these 36 participants, 16 wrote their comments in the space provided at the end of the survey. The remaining 19 participants verbally shared information about their experiences while the researcher intermittently took verbatim notes of their comments.

Following the method for analyzing qualitative data suggested by Creswell (2007), participants’ comments were coded, categorized, and grouped into two major themes: positive experiences with school professionals and challenging experiences while participating in their child’s special education process. Comments that did not fit under either theme were considered separately.

Positive experiences with school personnel. In the comment section, 10 participants elaborated about their positive experiences with school personnel. They described school professionals as being helpful. Parents appreciated the effort that professionals made to educate them about the special education process and to include them in the decision-making process regarding the child’s programming. A couple of mothers explained:

The school and school district have done a lot to help my child. The teacher and therapists are very kind. They explain what they think (to me) and ask my opinion. They always communicate with me… They tell me what I can do to help my child.

I have not had that many problems (with the special education process) because Early Steps gave me a lot of information about the process at school, the therapies, programs, (and) services. They gave me tools to understand what was coming…

Furthermore, several participants commented on teachers’ pleasant personalities and emphasized teachers’ kindness and loving attitudes towards their children. Some comments from parents included:

I am happy with everything. The teachers love my child very much.
He has had good services… The teachers have been very special with my child.

The experience has been good. They treat my child well.

**Challenging experiences while participating in the special education process.** The second theme identified in this analysis involved school as well as parent-related challenges encountered by parents. One of the types of challenges most frequently mentioned by participants involved issues related to parents’ limited English language skills. For example, six participants (n=6) indicated that their inability to speak English made it difficult for them to communicate with school personnel and help their children with schoolwork. The following statements illustrate these parents’ sentiment:

The most difficult part is communicating because of the language (difference).

I would like somebody to support (me) with interpreting (into Spanish) so (I) could understand the (special) education process.

I would like to know how to help my child…to make progress in school… because I do not speak English.

Another parent-related challenge mentioned by four participants (n=4) was parents’ overall difficulties participating in school-related activities due to time or transportation issues. Some participant statements were:

My greatest problem to participate is (that)…I have to work…

Not being able to drive keeps me from going to the school more often.

Three parents (n=3) stated that their difficulties understanding the child’s disability and IEP process were issues that sometimes obstructed their participation in the special education process. Concerning school-related challenges, comments from participants (n=8) expressed concern about the limited understanding of disabilities that district administrators, principals, teachers, and therapists seemed to have. Nine (n=9) participants were dissatisfied with their
children’ special educators’ instructional skills as well as the way special programs functioned.

Examples of comments from parents included:

I think that people who... teach these children should be better prepared, not just intellectually but psychologically, and more than anything (they must) have a lot patience to (get to) know the children better.

... several teachers have mistreated my child...the experience has taught me not to trust (teachers)... they (teachers) do not know how to put their heart (into their work)...

I think my child has other problems besides what they say. They (school personnel) think that all of his problems are due to (the fact that) he is bilingual... the teacher communicates with me but does not offer solutions.

Also, some participants (n= 6) commented on some challenges they faced regarding the IEP meeting, which suggested discontent with the quality of the IEP process. These parents disagreed with some of the instructional goals included in the IEPs and felt that school personnel did not allow enough time for IEP meetings. Some of participants’ comments regarding this topic were:

They are in a hurry to get it (the IEP) over with.

...many times, (IEPs) are unrealistic.

(School district) therapists focus on academic goals rather than rehabilitation... they do not adjust the priorities to the needs of the child.

Three parents (n=3) shared their experiences during their children’s evaluation and placement processes. They complained about schools taking too long to provide services. Examples of their comments are:

...It took four months for them to find a school for my child with autism. They told me that they did not have a spot available... that there was no problem with him not going to school because he was not 5 years old yet.
If I had accepted the answer from the therapist, my child would not be receiving the accommodations he needs.

Finally, three participants (n=3) commented on their condition as immigrants making it more difficult for them to participate in their children’s special education process.

**Additional comments.** Three participants (n=3) provided comments unrelated to the two major themes identified in this analysis. A participant commented on the importance of parents’ setting long-term goals for children with disabilities and persevering until these goals have been accomplished. Another parent emphasized the need for parents to be involved in their child’s educational process to encourage the child’s academic and emotional growth. Lastly, one participant stated that parents should ask questions until they fully understood their child’s IEP and avoid signing any documents until they were completely satisfied with the content of the IEP.

In summary, the comments provided by 36 of the 50 participants offered specific examples of the types of experiences encountered by Latino parents while navigating the special education system. The analysis of this data revealed two major themes: positive experiences versus challenging experiences that parents encountered while navigating the special education system.

**Latino Parents’ Experiences and Parental Participation in the Special Education Process**

Inferential statistics were calculated to examine the relationship between the experiences of first-generation immigrant Latinos while navigating the special education system and parental participation in their children’s special education process. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. To compensate for the small sample size, adjusted squared regression coefficients (adjusted β) were used to determine effect size (Ferguson, 2009).
**Regression.** Multiple regression analysis was used to evaluate if parents’ knowledge of the educational system, perception of school personnel, and English language communication skills predicted parent participation in their children’s special education process. The null hypothesis for this regression model stated that, for participants in this study, none of the independent variables accounted for a significant portion of the variance in parents’ participation scores ($H_0: B=0$). The research hypothesis for this model stated that the proposed regression did account for a significant portion of the variance in parent participation scores ($H_1$: the variance of at least one of the independent variables is different from zero). The results of this regression (see Table 6) indicated that the independent variables included in this model explained about 33% of the variance in parents participation in their children’s special education process ($R^2=.327$, $F_{(3,42)}= 6.81$, $p<.001$).

### Table 6

<table>
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<th>$F$</th>
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<td>Error</td>
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<td>13.48</td>
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<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>20.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. $R^2= 0.33; p \leq .05$*

English language communication skills ($b = .19$, $t = 2.19$, $p = .03$) significantly predicted parent participation in the special education process. In fact, parent participation scores increased by .33 raw points by every point-increase in parent’s English language skills. Also, a medium effect size ($F_{(1,42)} = 4.80$, adjusted $\beta = .11$) indicated a moderate relationship between parents’ English language communication skills and parents’ participation in the special education process. In other words, it is quite possible that parents’ English language
communication skill also plays an important role in parent participation in the special education process in the practical sense.

Additionally, although not technically significant, knowledge of the American education system \((b = .33, t = 2.01, p = .051)\) had a moderate effect \((F_{(1,42)} = 4.02, \text{ adjusted } \beta = .10)\) on parents’ participation; it accounted for 10% of the variance, causing a rise of .33-points in the parent participation score for every 1-point increase. Future research involving a larger sample may be able to provide more accurate information about the statistical significance of this variable. Finally, perception of school personnel \((b = .24, t = 1.43, p = .016)\) did not predict parental participation in the special education process (see Table 7).

Table 7

Regression Model 1 - Influence of Latino Parents’ Experiences on their Participation in the Special Education Process of their Children with Disabilities: Test results by predictor

<table>
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<th>Predictor</th>
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<th>MS</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Adjusted (\beta)</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<td>1.29</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ English language communication skills</td>
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<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents’ perception of school personnel</td>
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<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. \(p \leq .05; \ast = \text{significant.}\)
A second regression was conducted after expanding the previous model to include three demographic variables considered particularly relevant to this study. The main purpose of this model was to examine the relationship among the three independent variables included in the previous regression and parents’ participation in their children's special education process, while controlling for parents’ educational level, parents’ number of years in the United States, and child’s disability. As in the first regression, the null hypothesis for this model stated that the proposed regression did not account for a significant portion of the variance in parent’s participation in the special education process (H₀: B = 0). Likewise, the research hypothesis stated that this regression model did explain a significant portion of the variance in parents’ participation (H₁ = at least one of the independent variables is different from zero).

To facilitate the statistical analysis, categories were created within each demographic variable. Before conducting the test, data files were split and then further divided to fit into sub-categories: (a) parents educational level (high school or less, at least some college), (b) parents length of time living in the United states (10 years or less, more than 10 years), and (c) child’s disability (autism, speech/language impairments, and other disabilities).

Patterns in the data were considered to create these categories and allow for a similar number of participants in each group. Within each group, dummy variables were assigned to each sub-category. Overall, this second regression ($R^2 = 0.57$, $F = 7.18$, $p < .001$) explained about 57% of the variance in parental participation in the special education process, leaving less than 1% of probability that these results occurred by chance (see Table 8).
Results from the regression indicated that parents’ knowledge of the American education system \((b = .35, t = 2.41, p = .02)\), parents’ perception of school personnel \((b = 0.35, t = 2.25, p = 0.03)\), parents’ English language communication skills \((b = .20, t = 2.06, p = .04)\), and child’s disability \((b = 0.7, t = 3.90, p < .001)\) predicted parents’ participation in their children’s special education process. A rise of 0.35, 0.35, and 0.19 points in parental participation was observed for every 1-point increase in parents’ knowledge of the American education system, parents’ perception of school personnel, and parents’ English language communication skills, respectively. Also, in this model, knowledge of the American education system (adjusted \(\beta = .29, F_{(1,38)} = 20.08, p = <.001\)) predicted 29% of the variance in parents’ participation in the special education process. Perception of school personnel (adjusted \(\beta = .07, F_{(1,38)} = 5.07, p = .03\)) predicted 7% of the variance. Parents’ English language communication skills (adjusted \(\beta = .05, F_{(1,38)} = 3.59, p = .06\)) predicted 5% of the variance. Child’s disability (adjusted \(\beta = .15, F_{(1,42)} = 5.32, p < .001\)) predicted 15% of the variance in parent participation.

Furthermore, knowledge of the American educational system and child’s disability had large and medium effect sizes, respectively, suggesting that the impact of these two variables may be not only statistically but also practically significant. On the other hand, the small effect sizes shown by English language communication skills and perception of school personnel

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<th>SS</th>
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<td>11.41</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>7.18</td>
<td>&lt;.0001*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>8.63</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
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<td>20.04</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Note. \(R^2 = 0.57, p \leq .05\).
suggest weak relationships between these variables and parental participation in the special education process. Although statistically significant, the practical impact of these variables may not be as clear in real life. Therefore, parents’ knowledge of the American education system and child’s disability were the strongest predictors of parental participation in the special education process since they accounted for the largest portion of variance.

Regarding the relationship between child’s disability and parent participation in the special education process, results from this model indicate that, while holding other disabilities constant, the regression was significant for autism ($b = .70$, $t = 3.90$, $p < .001$). Also, although having a child with speech/language impairments ($b_i = -0.05$, $t = -0.27$, $p = .79$) results in a lower parent participation score than having a child with other disabilities, no significant statistical difference in parental participation exists between these two groups. Similarly, there was a positive ($b = .25$, $t = 1.55$), but not statistically significant, relationship between parents’ participation in the special education process and the number of years lived in the United States (adjusted $\beta = .04$, $F(1, 38) = 2.42$, $p = .13$). Last, parents’ educational level (adjusted $\beta = .12$, $F(1, 38) = 8.45$, $p = .27$) was found to be statistically non-significant in predicting parental participation in the special education process, contributing only to 1.2% of the variance in parents’ participation in the special education process. See Table 9 for a summary of the results from this regression model.
Analysis of variance. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the association between Latino parents’ participation in the special education process and four items initially intended to represent culturally-based issues related to Latinos’ perception of their role in their children’s education (see Table 10). To facilitate the analysis of the data, participants were divided into two groups: (a) parents who experienced (frequently/always) the situation described in items 16, 24, 32, and 33 and (b) parents who did not (never/rarely) experience the situation reflected in items 16, 24, 32, and 33. The null hypothesis (H₀: μ_A = μ_B) and research hypothesis (H₁: μ_A is different from μ_B) remained the same for all tests.

Results from the ANOVA yielded a statistically significant effect for item 33 (F_(1,48) = 4.15, p = .05), indicating that the mean parental participation score was lower for parents who
had difficulty confronting school personnel about their child’s needs ($m = 1.96, sd = .80$) compared to those who did not ($m = 2.37, sd = .57$). Parents’ difficulties confronting school personnel about the child’s educational needs contributed 6% of the variability in parents’ participation in the special education process. Although the practical effect of this variable appears to be small (adjusted $\eta^2 = .06$), the mean difference was statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis for this test was rejected.

Conversely, the effects for the experiences illustrated in items 16 ($F_{(1,46)} = 2.35, p = .13$), 24 ($F_{(1,48)} = .69, p = .41$), and 32 ($F_{(1,47)} = .12, p = .73$) were non-significant. As a result, the research hypotheses for these three interactions were not supported, and the null hypotheses were accepted. These findings suggest that the participation of immigrant Latino parents in their children’s special education process is not necessarily influenced by cultural traits such as worrying about teachers thinking that parents are interfering too much in their work, being concerned about appearing disrespectful, or believing that teachers understand their children’s needs better than parents.
Pearson chi square test. Chi square statistics were computed to examine a possible relationship between item 33 and selected demographic variables (see Table 11). As in the ANOVA, participants’ responses to item 33 were grouped into two categories: (a) participants who did not (never/rarely) have the experience and (b) participants who did (always/frequently) have it. The relationship between the selected demographic variables and parents’ responses to item 33 was not statistically significant. Parents were equally likely to have difficulty confronting school personnel about their child’s educational needs regardless of their educational level, time living in the United States, or child’s disability.
Table 11

Relation between Demographic Variables and Parents’ Difficulty Confronting School Personnel About Their Child’s Educational Needs (Q33)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Parent’s Educational Level</th>
<th>Parent’s # of Years in the United States</th>
<th>Child’s Disability</th>
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<td>Missing = 0, df = 1</td>
<td>Missing = 1, df = 1</td>
<td>Missing = 0, df = 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chi square = 1.25</td>
<td>Chi square = .48</td>
<td>Chi square = 1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p = .26</td>
<td>p = .49</td>
<td>p = .56</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>At least some college</th>
<th>High school or less</th>
<th>10 or more years</th>
<th>Less than 10 years</th>
<th>Autism</th>
<th>Speech Language Impairment</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
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Summary

In this study, quantitative data showed that most Latino parents of children with disabilities communicated often with school personnel, trusted professionals working with their children, shared teachers’ expectations for the child, received invitations to visit schools for different events, and received suggestions from teachers about how to help their children. In addition, the majority of participants felt that school personnel had a positive attitude towards their child and family and paid attention to parents’ opinions about their child’s needs. About half of the participants had limited English language skills and needed interpreters to communicate with school personnel. Also, a minority of participants believed that teachers knew best about their children’s needs or thought that teachers believed that parents interfered too much in their work. Only 6% of participants felt uncomfortable with having so many professionals in the IEP meetings. Additionally, qualitative data collected in the optional comments section of the survey provided specific examples of the situations experienced by...
participants. Twenty-five percent of participants who completed this section emphasized their positive experiences with school personnel. Challenges most frequently mentioned by parents included issues related to school professionals’ performance and the IEP process as well as parents’ communication difficulties (due to their limited English proficiency), lack of time, and transportation problems.

A positive and significant linear relationship was found between the participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process and parents’ knowledge of the American education system, perception of school personnel, and English language communication skills. The child’s disability was found to be another predictor of immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process. Parents of children with autism participated in the special education process significantly more than parents of children with speech and language disorders or parents of children with other disabilities. A large effect size suggested a strong relationship between parent participation in the special education process and parent knowledge of the American school system. Similarly, the moderate effect size of child’s disability indicated a medium, and possibly practically significant, relationship with parental participation. Finally, results from the analysis of variance suggested an association between parents’ difficulty confronting school personnel about their child’s needs and parental participation in their children’s special education process. However, no significant association was found between parental participation in the special education process and parents’ belief that teachers understood the child’s disability better than parents or that teacher may think that parents are being disrespectful or interfering too much in their work.
Chapter V

Discussion

Overview of the Study

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997 and IDEIA, 2004) grants parents the right to be active participants in all educational decisions concerning their children with disabilities. However, research suggests that parents’ participation in their children’s special education process is affected by a variety of parent- and school-related factors (Fish, 2006, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller et al., 2008; Span et al., 2003; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010; Zionts et al., 2003). For many Latino parents of children with disabilities, additional linguistic (Hughes et al., 2008; Langdon, 2009) and cultural (Harry, 2002; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Olivos, 2009) issues may impact their experiences with the special education process. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences that first-generation immigrant Latino parents have when navigating the special education system and to identify the factors that influence their participation in their children’s special education process. A purposive sample of 50 immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities was used in this study. A researcher-developed survey (Special Education Parent Participation Survey, SPED-PPS) was utilized to gather the data.

Discussion of the Findings

Participation of Latino Parents in the Special Education Process

Previous research studies have suggested that Latinos have low levels of parental involvement in their children’s education (Tinkler, 2002). This has often been attributed to the fact that the definition of parental involvement used in most studies is based on European-American values and expectations of parental engagement, which may be culturally inappropriate for Latinos (Hill & Torres, 2010; Orozco, 2008; Ryan et al., 2010). However,
participants in this study reported participating often in their children’s special education process. The discrepancy between results from previous research and findings from this study could be explained by the official nature of the special education process and the gravity of the needs exhibited by children with disabilities. Immigrant Latino parents may be more inclined to participate in their children’s education once they realize that their children will need additional support to achieve their developmental, academic, behavioral, and/or socio-emotional goals, like it is the case with most children with disabilities. Also, immigrant Latino parents may be more likely to become involved in their children’s education when there is a clear expectation of parental participation, as it occurs throughout multiple steps of the special education process (e.g., evaluation, IEP meetings).

By narrowing the focus of the investigation to parental participation in the special education process, this study has gathered very specific information. Participation in the special education process is only one aspect of potential parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities, and it does not imply involvement in the other aspects of children’s education that are often measured in education research, such as attendance to school functions and homework assistance (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Stewart, 2008). Consequently, results from this study may not be compared against previous findings concerning parental involvement in the Latino population.

**Parents’ Knowledge of the American Education System**

Findings from this study suggest that Latino parents had adequate knowledge of the America education system ($M=2.26$). However, a more in-depth analysis of the data showed that more than one third of participants had difficulty understanding how American schools worked and lacked information about the types of services available to their children with disabilities.
Likewise, more than one fourth of participants did not comprehend how special education programs operated. The inconsistencies identified in this study suggest that immigrant Latino parents may overestimate their overall knowledge of the American education system and special education process. These results are consistent with findings from earlier research which showed discrepancies between Latino parents’ self-reported knowledge of the special education process and the level of understanding that they demonstrated while navigating the special education system (Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001). Therefore, when investigating immigrant Latino parents’ understanding of the special education system, it is important to examine parents’ actual knowledge of the different aspects of the American educational system as well as their ability to effectively use this information while participating in the special education process.

Both regression models conducted in this study revealed a strong relationship between Latino parents’ knowledge of the American education system and their participation in their children’s special education process. In fact, the second regression model found that, after controlling for demographic variables such as parents’ educational level, parents’ length of time living in the United States, and child’s disability, parents’ knowledge of the American educational system was the best predictor of immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process. This result supports previous qualitative findings suggesting that Latino parents’ knowledge of educational services affects their ability to participate in their children special education decision-making process (Bailey et al., 1999). In addition, it confirms findings from earlier studies involving non-Latino parents, which identified a need for parents to be knowledgeable about the education system and special education procedures in order to improve their decision-making outcomes (e.g., Fish, 2006, 2008). Thus, it appears that parents’
knowledge of the educational system may have a similar impact on parental participation in the special education process regardless of parents being Latino or not.

Research has shown that parents’ cultural and social capital influence parents’ advocacy style and ability to use their children’s disability label to secure services for their children (Trainor, 2010 a,b). Nevertheless, these are aspects of parental participation in the special education process that may not resonate with some immigrant parents until after they have become familiar with American education laws and school procedures. In other words, immigrant Latino parents who have a limited understanding of the American education system may not realize the implications of their role as active participants in the special education process, within the American school culture.

On the other hand, a greater knowledge of the American education system (including general education protocols, educational practices, and special education procedures) may empower Latino parents to have a more active role in their children’s special education process. Once immigrant Latino parents understand the different services available to children with disabilities, they may be able to contribute more to the decision-making process and ask for what they believe their children need. Moreover, school personnel may be more motivated to acknowledge the concerns or suggestions of informed parents. Educators may view knowledgeable parents as more capable partners in identifying ways to address students’ needs; they may welcome knowledgeable parents’ participation in the special education process to avoid potential conflicts. At the same time, uninformed parents’ tendency to automatically accept the decisions made by the rest of the IEP team may contribute to professionals’ decreased interest in encouraging parental participation in the special education process. Either way, in order to become effective
participants in their children’s special education process, immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities need to understand the different aspects of the American education system.

**Parents’ English Language Communication Skills**

Data showed that approximately half of the participants in this study had difficulty communicating in English with school personnel and needed interpreting assistance during IEP meetings. These results are consistent with regional statistics on the percentage (55%) of children of immigrants whose parents have limited English language proficiency. However, these findings are cause for concern since results from both regression models indicated an association between parents’ English language communication skills and Latino parents’ participation in the special education process.

Several possible explanations exist for these findings. The most obvious explanation is that poor English language skills restrict parents’ opportunities to communicate effectively with school personnel. Parents may have difficulty communicating their concerns and expectations to school because of the dependence on an interpreter to facilitate the interaction. This issue is particularly problematic for parents of children attending schools that serve a very small Latino student population, where interpreting services must be scheduled in advance due to the shortage of bilingual staff. Likewise, parents’ participation in the special education process can be affected by the quality of language interpreting services (Cheatham, 2010). The use of untrained interpreters may lead to miscommunication, negatively affecting parents’ participation in the special education process. Another way in which parents’ limited English language proficiency may impact their participation in the special education process is by restricting their access to information about the mechanism of the American education system (Langdon, 2009). For example, parents’ poor English language skills are likely to limit Latino parents’ networking
opportunities with school personnel and disability-related agencies, which are key resources typically used by parents when learning about programs and services for their children with disabilities.

In this study, 48% of participants felt uncomfortable asking school personnel questions because of their own limited English skills. This result could be connected to findings from an earlier study indicating that many Latino parents with limited English language skills fail to actively participate during the IEP meeting due to language alienation issues that made them feel ashamed and frustrated by their inability to get educators to listen (Salas, 2004). Since the ability to communicate with school personnel is associated with parents’ sense of self-efficacy (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995), it is probable that immigrant Latino parents’ inability to communicate with educators generate feelings of incompetence that discourage them from participating in their children’s special education process.

However, it is important to emphasize that, although the results from this study confirmed previous findings regarding the role of English language skills in Latino parents’ participation in their children’s special education process, the effect size of this relationship was very small. This is an unexpected finding since one would anticipate language differences to play a larger role on parental participation. A reason for this result could be that other variables, such as participants’ length of time living in the country and educational levels, compensated for parents’ limited English language proficiency. For example, the average number of years that participants had lived in the United States at the time of data collection was nine years. In fact, more than half of participants had lived in the country for more than 10 years. Thus, participants
may have been acculturated enough that their English language limitations were not as much of a barrier for them as it might have been if they were newcomers to the United States.

Also, compared to the average Latino immigrant living in the United States, participants in this study had a higher educational level (http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/states/pdf/LA_10.pdf). A relatively high percentage of participants (12%) were college graduates. Thus, participants’ educational level may have compensated for parents’ limited English language proficiency. Educated parents may be more resourceful at finding alternative means to communicate with school personnel. In addition, contrary to previous generations of linguistically diverse parents, today’s immigrants can take advantage of increasingly available, user-friendly, and relatively inexpensive technology (e.g., cell phones, translation websites, language interpretation applications) to negotiate some of their language barriers. Current technology may allow immigrant Latinos access to information about the child’s disability and the American special educational system in their native language. The availability of alternate ways to access information or communicate with school personnel may empower Latino parents to participate in their children’s special education process in spite of their limited English language skills.

**Parents’ Perception of School Personnel**

Results from the second regression model showed that, after controlling for parents’ length of time living in the United States, parents’ educational level, and child’s disability, parents’ perception of school personnel was a significant predictor of Latino parent participation in the special education process. Although this finding is consistent with outcomes from previous studies, the effect size for this variable was rather small. This suggests that, while statistically significant, the impact of Latino parents’ perception of school personnel on their
participation in the special education process may not be as clear in real life. A positive perception of school personnel probably helps parents feel more comfortable participating in school-related activities, including their child’s special education process. However, parents’ perception of school personnel may not be as strong a motivator for parents to participate as having a child with autism or knowing about education laws and procedures, which seemed to be highly influential variables.

Another interesting finding regarding this topic refers to the presumed association between educators’ cultural competence and parents’ perception of school personnel. Earlier research studies have suggested that parents’ perception of school personnel’s cultural competence affects their impressions of educators’ ability to understand parents’ expectations for their children (Harry, 1992; Hughes et al., 2008). In this study, approximately half of participants did not think that their children’s teachers understood their families’ culture and lifestyle. Yet, most participants had a positive perception of school personnel ($M = 2.32$). Additionally, the majority of participants trusted their children’s teachers, thought that school personnel had a positive attitude toward their children and families, believed that teachers shared their expectations for their child, and felt that school personnel listened to their opinions about their child. These findings contradict the belief among some educators regarding the need to have specific knowledge about the family’s culture and native language to be able to develop partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Educators’ attitudes and understanding of cultural and linguistic differences influence their ability to collaborate with diverse parents (Langdon, 2009; Olivos, 2009). Nonetheless, results from this study indicate that Latino parents may not view school personnel’s understanding of the Latino culture as an indispensable requirement for parent-school collaboration to occur. It is possible that educators’
overall attitudes toward immigrant Latino children and families have a greater impact on parents’
perception of school personnel than educators’ cultural competence per se.

In addition, immigrants tend to become more acculturated the longer they live in the host
culture (Leidy et al., 2010). Thus, the length of time that participants in this study had lived in
the United States may have enabled their own understanding of cultural differences, allowing
them to be more comfortable around school personnel and tolerant of what they perceive to be
teachers’ lack of knowledge about Latino culture. Likewise, since the acculturation process
tends to be less challenging for more educated immigrants (Berry, 1997; Piedra & Engstrom,
2009), the relatively high educational level of the majority of participants in this study may have
aided parent-school communication, making educators’ limited understanding of parents’ culture
less of an issue for participants. Also, with the large influx of Latino students to American
schools in the last decade, today’s educators may be more accustomed to interacting with Latino
families and feel more comfortable collaborating with immigrant Latino parents regardless of
their degree of specific knowledge of Latino culture.

Furthermore, in contrast to this study, most research exploring Latino parents’ perception
of special educators has been conducted in areas of the country where there was a high
concentration of Latinos (e.g., Marschall, 2006; Ramirez, 2003; Shah, 2009). However, research
suggests that immigrants who live in areas where there is a small concentration of individuals
with similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds take less time to acculturate than those who live
in communities where there is a large concentration of immigrants from the same culture (Taras,
Rowney, & Steel, 2012). Immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities who attend
school in areas where there is a smaller Latino population may not expect educators to know
about their native culture. Instead, they may be forced to focus more on educators’ general
attitudes rather than their cultural competence. Participants’ comments about their own positive experiences while navigating the special education system emphasized their satisfaction with teachers’ attitudes toward their children and attempts to help parents feel comfortable with the special education process. These comments support the idea that parents’ sense of contentment with their children’s special education programs is linked to schools’ welcoming atmosphere, teachers’ respectful attitudes, and school personnel encouragement of parental participation in educational decisions concerning their child (Fish, 2008).

**Parents’ Perception of Their Own Role in Their Children’s Education**

Much has been said about the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity on parents’ views of their child’s disability (Harry, 2002) and the special education process (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). As a result, in this study, four survey items were created to examine some of the, presumably, unique cultural values that are believed to affect Latino parents’ participation in the special education process. Regarding these Latino culture-based items, data from this study showed that more than a third of participants believed that teachers knew best about their child’s needs. This result supports findings from previous studies which suggested a tendency among Latinos to view special education professionals as the “experts” (Hughes et al., 2008). On the other hand, one-fourth of participants were concerned about appearing disrespectful to teachers and thought that teachers might think that they (parents) interfered too much in their work with the child. Participants’ concern with how educators view them is consistent with a heightened sense of deference toward school professionals, which has been identified as one of the reasons for Latino parents maintaining a “respectful distance” from special education professionals (Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001) and accepting decisions proposed during IEP meetings, even if they do not agree with them (Harry, 1992). However, since the responses provided by the majority of
participants in this study were different from those previously reported in the literature, it would be difficult to determine whether parents’ responses to these particular items reflected Latino cultural values or parents’ individual interaction styles.

This study found that parents who had difficulty confronting school personnel about the child’s educational needs participated less in the special education process. Latino parents have reported a reluctance to demand more from educators because of feelings of inadequacy related to their low educational levels and limited English language communication skills (Hughes et al., 2008). It makes sense that parents who feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions to school personnel would avoid participating in the special education process, especially when the expectation for parental participation involve a degree of mastery of the English language and knowledge of the special education system that they do not possess. However, no significant association was found between parents who had difficulty confronting school personnel and the selected demographic variables used in the data analysis (parents’ educational level, parents’ length of time living in the United States, or child’s disability). It is possible that the size of the sample subgroup used to perform this analysis was too small to reveal any potential associations.

On the other hand, this study did not find any relationship between parents’ participation in their children’s special education process and parents’ belief that teachers thought that they interfered too much, parents concerns about seeming disrespectful, or parents’ conviction that teachers know best about their children’s needs. These findings may be explained by several factors. First, as stated earlier, most participants in this study lived in the United States for at least 10 years. Accordingly, they may have already learned how to negotiate their cultural values in order to participate in their children educational processes. Also, participants had a relatively higher educational level than average Latinos in the United States. Perhaps, immigrant
Latino parents who are more educated find it easier to understand and adopt American culture’s expectation of active parental participation in a child’s education. Likewise, there was an overrepresentation of parents of children with autism in the sample. Due to the complexity of this disability, parents of children with autism may be inclined to become more involved in their children’s special education process regardless of culturally conflicting views about parents’ role in their children’s education.

**Parent-School Communication**

Parent-school communication is considered an important factor in parental participation in the special education process. Studies have found that insufficient contact and ineffective communication with school personnel can cause conflict between parents and schools to escalate (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). For immigrant Latino parents, issues related to cultural and linguistic differences can create additional barriers to parent-school communication. The majority of participants in this study reported that school personnel made regular attempts to communicate with them about their child and provided opportunities for parents to be part of school-related events. Nevertheless, more than one third of participants struggled to understand the information shared during IEP meetings. Approximately half of the participants used interpreters to communicate with school personnel during IEP meetings. Parents’ difficulties understanding the information discussed during IEP meetings may be the result of the awkward nature of interpreter-facilitated interaction or the use of poorly trained interpreters, or interpreters who may not understand the content of the discussions and are unable to provide an accurate interpretation of the information. In addition, factors such as parents’ limited understanding of the American education system or the complexity of the child’s disability may pose challenges to parent-school communication that are unrelated to immigrant Latino parents’ English language
proficiency. Furthermore, since non-Latino parents also have reported being confused during IEP meetings (e.g., Fish, 2006), it is possible that some of the concerns that make parent-school communication difficult for Latino parents of children with disabilities are no related to issues of cultural and language diversity.

**Demographic Variables**

A very interesting finding of this study was the strong relationship between the type of disability that the child had and Latino parents’ participation in the special education process. Results from the multiple regression demonstrated that, compared to having a child with speech and/or language disorders or other disabilities (specific learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, other health impairment, multiple disabilities, hearing impairment, visual impairment, or traumatic brain injury), having a child with autism significantly increased the participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process. Although the relationship between child’s disability and Latino parents’ participation in their children’s special education process has not often been explored in the literature, this finding was not entirely unexpected. The complex cognitive, social, and behavioral challenges faced by children with autism spectrum disorders may drive parents to become more active in their children’s education to secure appropriate services for their children. Thus, as with other parents of children with autism, immigrant Latino parents of children with autism could be naturally motivated to participate in their children’s special education process. This finding does not seem to be related to the diversity issues that are often emphasized in multi-cultural special education research. Seemingly, the participation of immigrant Latino parents in their children’s special education process is influenced by an array of factors that go beyond cultural and linguistic differences. This result reminds educators of the importance of maintaining an open mind when facilitating
the participation of immigrant Latino parents in the special education process since some of the actions and responses exhibited by these parents may not always be explained by their ethnicity or immigrant condition.

Last but not least, a non-significant relationship existed between parents’ length of time living in the United States and their participation in their children’s special education process. Generally, immigrants’ length of time living in the host country is connected to the acculturation and language acquisition processes (Leidy et al., 2010), both of which could have a direct or indirect effect on parental participation. Nonetheless, the categories created for this variable (10 years or less and more than 10 years) may have been too broad, possibly masking the actual effects of the amount of time lived in the United States on parental participation in the special education process.

**Additional Experiences Described by Parents**

Additional factors affecting Latino-parents’ participation in the special education process appeared in some of the comments provided by participants. For example, participants mentioned lack of time and transportation problems as some of the issues that limited their participation in their children’s education. In addition, some of the challenging experiences that parents mentioned referred to dissatisfaction with the way their children’s special education services were provided, poor teacher quality, and problems at different stages of the special education process (e.g., evaluation, placement). These comments reiterated the fact that, although cultural and linguistic issues are a real concern for many Latinos, some of the experiences that influence immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education system are also experienced by non-Latino parents and may not be related to diversity issues. In addition, these findings were consistent with results from earlier studies where non-Latino
parents expressed concern about educators’ limited training in effective instructional methods (Zionts et al., 2003) and discontent with the services provided by schools (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Warner & Kasiyannis, 2010) and the way the IEP process was conducted (Fish, 2006; Mueller et al., 2008).

**Limitations**

This study had several limitations. First, due to the nature of the population in this study and the complexity of the recruitment process, a random sample could not be selected. The lack of an available list of potential participants due to confidentiality issues associated with special education mandates, as well as the need to rely on different agencies to disseminate information about the study, placed constraints in the number of participants that could be recruited. In turn, the small sample size limited the type of data analysis that could be performed. For example, the effect of some potentially relevant factors (e.g., child’s time in special education, child’s age of diagnosis, having another child with a disability) on parent participation in the special education process could not be assessed due to the small number of participants.

Furthermore, as with all survey research, there is the possibility that the responses offered by participants do not reflect their actual views, and that participants provided the answers that they believed to be socially desirable (Vogt, 2007). In addition, participants’ responses may have been distorted for those who received reading and writing assistance from the researcher while completing the survey. However, this bias was most likely reduced by recruiting participants through venues that were not connected to the researcher and collecting data anonymously.

Another bias associated with survey research is that self-selected participants are not always representative of the population (Creswell, 2007). In this study, there was an
overrepresentation of parents of children with autism, which may have skewed the data in favor of this group. Similarly, participants in this study had a higher educational level than most Latino immigrants in the region. Consequently, the experiences of these parents may not reflect those of the majority immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities who receive special education and/or related services.

Moreover, the bilingual nature of the survey introduces limitations to the study due to the well-known complications involved in creating bilingual instruments that measure the same construct in both languages (Erkut, 2010). Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of participants (47/50) completed the survey in Spanish may have provided some control for this bias. Also, the survey translation was carried out by individuals from different Latin American countries, which should have decreased the cultural and linguistic biases attached to specific Latino subcultures. Another potential survey-related limitation was the fact that a small number of participants who completed the survey during in-person meetings asked for clarification of two of the items designed to assess parents’ perception of their role in the special education process (items 16 and 24). In response, participants were instructed to read, or listen to, the statement again and answer the question according to their interpretation of the item. However, participants’ request for clarification suggests that these items should be revised for clarity prior to using SPED-PPS in subsequent studies.

A delimitating factor of this study is that the survey was distributed only to immigrant Latino parents who lived in a southern region of the United States that has a relatively small Latino population (about 4.00% of the overall population). The conditions and characteristics of Latino immigrants living in this region may be different from those of Latinos in other regions with a long history of Latino presence in schools (e.g., California, Texas, Arizona). Therefore,
the results from this study may not represent the experiences of Latino parents of children with disabilities receiving special education services in areas of the country where there is a high concentration of Latinos. Finally, this study focused on Latino immigrants; thus, the results cannot be generalized to subsequent generations of Latinos living in the United States.

**Study Implications**

Parental participation in the special education process is a frequent topic of discussion in special education mandates, teacher certification courses, and professional education literature. However, many professionals in the education field still struggle to understand how to assist the participation of Latino parents in the special education process. Findings from previous studies suggest that parents of children with disabilities struggle when navigating the special education system due to issues such as teachers’ limited training in effective instructional methods (Zionts et al., 2003), insufficient services in schools (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010), educators’ failure to include parents in the decision-making process (Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley; Mueller et al., 2008), and parents’ insufficient knowledge about special education laws (Fish, 2006, 2008; Span et al., 2003). Likewise, earlier research has identified additional challenges encountered by Latino parents while participating in the educational process, which include communication problems due to parents' limited English language proficiency (Hughes et al., 2008; Langdon, 2009), parents’ limited understanding of the American education system (Harry, 2002; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Olivos, 2009), and school personnel’s lack of training on effective ways to collaborate with culturally and linguistically diverse families (Kozleski et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

This study confirmed that immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process is influenced by issues related to parents’ linguistic and cultural diversity and immigrant condition (i.e., limited English language communication skills, knowledge of the
American education system, and parents’ difficulty confronting educators about their children’s education). To better assist Latino families, educators need to understand these issues and implement a plan to support Latino parents of children with disabilities. In addition, findings from this study suggest that immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process is also impacted by general aspects of parent-school collaboration previously identified in studies focusing on non-Latino population (i.e., parents’ perception of school personnel, limited knowledge of the special education process) as well as their child’s disability. Therefore, to facilitate parental participation in the special education process, educators must consider all these factors when communicating and collaborating with Latino parents.

By shedding some light on the factors that influence the participation of immigrant Latino parents in their children’s special education process, this study could help educators identify solutions for some of the issues they encounter when facilitating the special education process for these parents. For instance, school personnel must consider the multiple ways in which English language proficiency may affect immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education decision-making process. Results from this study support findings from previous studies (e.g., Ramirez, 2003) which suggested the need for schools to increase the number of bilingual staff who are familiar with students’ cultures to facilitate communication with linguistically diverse parents. As educators and school administrators gain a better understanding of all the interacting factors uncovered in this study, they should continue to search for alternative ways (e.g., technology, satellite interpreting services) to interact with immigrant Latino families and compensate for the shortage of bilingual staff. Similarly, the findings from this study could impact school administrators’ and educators’ work as they design
professional development activities with the purpose to support the participation of immigrant Latino parents’ in their children’s special education process.

In addition, the information gathered in this study could motivate schools and parent advocacy groups to develop an action plan for educating immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities about special education laws as well as the general aspects of the American education system. Likewise, the clear association between the child’s disability and immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process suggests that, although educators must consider the effect of variations in the cultural construction of disability on Latino parents’ actions (Harry, 2002), they also must keep in mind each parent’s personal traits and his/her general needs as a parent of a child with disabilities. Results from this study should increase educators’ as well as parent advocates’ awareness of the multiple factors that influence immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process. Equally important, these findings may help educators dismiss stereotypical ideas about Latino parents and embrace the fact that many immigrant Latino parents are able and willing to participate in their child’s special education process in spite of their cultural and linguistic barriers.

Suggestions for Future Research

The results from this study suggest a need to complete a series of investigations to increase our understanding of the multiple factors that affect parental participation in the special education process. Considering the lack of available instruments to examine such factors, the survey (Special Education Parent Participation Survey, SPED-PPS) created to gather data in this study has the potential to serve as a vehicle to contribute to the research in the field of multicultural special education. Additional studies using this survey, or variations of this survey, would add to the body of knowledge in this area.
Studies could investigate more extensively the interactions between the factors that influence immigrant Latino parents’ participation in the special education process. For example, building upon the results from this study, it would be worthwhile to explore the relationship between parents’ English language skills and parents difficulties confronting school personnel. This would allow us to understand whether the difficulties in this area expressed by immigrant Latino parents reflect their cultural values or are a byproduct of parents’ limited English proficiency. Also, the impact of parents’ length of time living in the United States may be better appreciated when comparing categories that are substantially different, according to the amount of time that immigrants typically need to learn about a new culture. Future studies could include the use of a continuum of narrower, distinctive categories (e.g., less than 5 years, 5 to 10 years, 10 to 15 years, etc.) to help determine the significance of this variable.

Follow-up studies could compare the experiences of immigrant and non-immigrant Latinos. Future generation of American-born Latinos, who have had personal experience with the American educational system and communicate proficiently in English, may have different experiences than Latino immigrants while navigating the special education system and participating in the special education process of their children with disabilities.

Further research studies could explore the variables that impact participation in the special education process of non-Latino (e.g., Caucasian, African-American, Asian) parents. For instance, studies including parents from different ethnic groups would help clarify whether the parent-school communication issues identified in this study are exclusive to immigrant Latino parents or are also experienced by parents from other ethnic or cultural backgrounds. In addition, comparative research involving parents from different ethnic groups is necessary to
provide further insight into the relationship between Latino cultural values and the frequency with which parents have the experiences presented in the SPED-PPS.

Issues such as limited knowledge of the American education system and English language proficiency are likely to affect many first-generation immigrants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Studies could be designed to examine the impact of such factors on the participation of immigrant parents of different ethnicities (e.g., Asian, Arabic) in the special education process. Likewise, research studies involving parents from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds would help determine the extent to which the type of disability that the child has influences parental participation of Latinos compared to non-Latino parents. Finally, studies could assess the effect of different demographic variables (e.g., having more than one child with a disability, having more than one child with a disability, parents’ age, length of time in special education) on parental participation in the special education process within the different populations. Future studies should include larger samples to ensure the generalizability of the results.

Understanding the factors that influence parental participation in the special education process is a necessary step toward improving parent-school collaboration and increasing parental involvement in the decision-making process. Exploring immigrant Latino parents’ impressions and use of different resources could provide education professionals with further insight into the types of experiences that Latino parents find to be most effective in supporting their participation in their children’s special education process.

**Conclusions**

This study added to the body of knowledge concerning immigrant Latino parents’ experiences when navigating the special education system as well as the factors that influence
their participation in the special education process. Findings showed that most Latino parents of children with disabilities communicated often with school personnel, trusted professionals working with their children, shared teachers’ expectations for the child, received invitations to visit schools for different events, and were offered suggestions from teachers about how to help their children. In addition, the majority of participants felt that school personnel paid attention to their opinions about their child’s needs and had a positive attitude toward their child and family. About half of the participants had limited English language skills and needed interpreters to communicate with school personnel. A minority of participants believed that teachers knew best about their children’s needs, thought that teachers believed that parents interfered too much in their work, and felt uncomfortable with having many professionals in the IEP meetings.

Supplementary data provided examples of positive and challenging situations experienced by immigrant Latino parents while navigating the special education system. Parents’ comments regarding their positive experiences focused mostly on the helpfulness of school personnel and the treatment that teachers gave their children. Additional challenging experiences related by parents referred to issues concerning poor teacher quality, ineffective administrators, dissatisfaction with the IEP process, and communication problems due to parent’s lack of time or transportation.

A positive and significant relationship was found between the participation in the special education process of immigrant Latino parents and parents’ knowledge of the American education system, perception of school personnel, and English language communication skills. In addition, the child’s disability was identified as a predictor of immigrant Latino parent’s participation in the special education process. Likewise, an association was identified between
parents’ difficulty confronting school personnel about their child’s needs and parental participation in their children’s special education process.

In summary, findings from this study suggest that Latino parents’ participation in their child’s special education process is influenced by a multitude of parent and school-related factors. Some of these factors are related to parents’ cultural background and immigrant condition, while others are associated with the general challenges involved in having a child with a disability. This study has implications for all educators who work directly with immigrant Latino parents of children with disabilities, parent advocates, educators and related service providers, and professional-development instructors. Suggestions for future research include the completion of a series of comparative studies exploring how the factors identified in this study affect the participation in the special education process among parents from different ethnic backgrounds. Also, studies involving larger samples should be conducted. The limitations and delimitations of the study should be considered when interpreting these findings.
References


Executive Order 13166 of 1964, C.F.R. 00–20867.


Hong, S., & Ho, H. (2005). Direct and indirect longitudinal effects of parental involvement on student achievement: Second-order latent growth modeling across ethnic groups. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 97*(1), 32-42. DOI: 10.1037/0020-6663.97.1.32


Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.


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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research

University of New Orleans

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Linda Flynn-Wilson

Co-Investigator: Maria Isolina Ruiz

Date: December 5, 2011

Protocol Title: “Factors Influencing the Participation of First-Generation Immigrant Latino Parents’ in the Special Education Process of their Children with Disabilities”

IRB#: 01Dec11

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101 category 2, due to the fact that the information obtained is not recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project.

Sincerely,

Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair

UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research
(AGENCY’S GREETING OR INTRODUCTION)

Attached information regarding the study:

The University of New Orleans needs Latino mothers and fathers of children with disabilities, ages 3-12, to complete a survey about their participation in their children’s education.

The survey is anonymous, and the information collected is confidential.

Surveys are available in English and Spanish.

For information about how you can participate in this study, please contact

María Ruiz

(504) --- ----

--------@hotmail.com

Volunteers will receive a $20.00 gift card.
(AGENCY’S GREETING OR INTRODUCTION)

Attached information regarding the study:

La Universidad de Nueva Orleans busca madres y padres latinos que tengan niños con necesidades especiales entre las edades de 3 a 12 años para participar en una encuesta sobre su participación en la educación de sus hijos.

La encuesta es anónima y la información recolectada es confidencial.

Las encuestas estarán disponibles en inglés y español.

Para información sobre cómo participar en este estudio, por favor comuníquese con María Ruiz

(504) --- ----

--------@hotmail.com

Todos los voluntarios recibirán una tarjeta de compras por $20.00.
Se necesitan madres y padres Latinos para estudio de la Universidad de Nueva Orleans.

Si su hijo(a) tiene entre 3 a 12 años de edad y ha sido diagnosticado con alguna discapacidad, por favor comuníquese con

**María Ruiz**
*(504) --- ****

para completar una encuesta sobre las experiencias de los latinos en la educación de sus hijos con necesidades especiales.

La información recolectada es confidencial.

Todos los voluntarios recibirán una tarjeta de compras por $20.00!
Estimado (parent):

Gracias por completar el cuestionario sobre la participación de los padres latinos en la educación especial de sus hijos con discapacidades, el cual le fue enviado el día (date).

Si usted no ha completado el cuestionario y todavía desea participar en el estudio, por favor llene el cuestionario anexado a esta carta y devuélvalo en el sobre estampado incluido en este paquete.

A manera de recordatorio, este estudio está siendo realizado por una estudiante del programa de doctorado en educación especial de la Universidad de Nueva Orleans. Ella necesita padres y madres latinos(as) que tengan niños con discapacidades entre las edades de 3 a 12 años. La información recolectada en este estudio es confidencial. Los resultados serán reportados de manera anónima. Esta información podría ayudar a las escuelas a identificar una mejor manera de apoyar la participación de los padres latinos en la educación de sus hijos con necesidades especiales.

La participación en este estudio es completamente voluntaria. Los voluntarios deberán completar un cuestionario, lo cual toma aproximadamente 20 minutos.

Todos los padres que participen recibirán una tarjeta de compras de Wal-Mart por el valor de $20.00.

Si usted tiene una pregunta con respecto al estudio, por favor comuníquese conmigo al número de teléfono o dirección electrónica indicado al final de este mensaje.

Atentamente,

María Isolina Ruiz

(504) --- ----

---------@hotmail.com
Appendix F

Thank You Note to Parents

Estimado(a) (parent’s name):

Gracias por completar el cuestionario sobre las experiencias que tienen los padres latinos al participar en el proceso de educación especial de sus hijos con discapacidades. Por favor reciba la tarjeta de compras de Wal-Mart incluida con esta nota como agradecimiento a su colaboración y apoyo a este proyecto.

Atentamente,

María Isolina Ruiz
University of New Orleans
--------@hotmail.com
(504) --- ----
Appendix G

Special Education Parent Participation Survey - SPED-PPS

English Version

(Noticed Attached to Emailed and Mailed Surveys and Read to Parents during Survey Completion Meetings)

NOTICE

Special education includes special classes and programs, speech and language therapy, occupational and physical therapy, adaptive physical education, and interpreting services for students with limited hearing or deaf, among others services. ESL classes and English/Spanish interpreting or translations are not part of special education.
Special Education Parent Participation Survey - SPED-PPS

Please mark one answer for each question in this survey based on what you know. There are not right or wrong answers. The information you provide in this survey is confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this study. To protect your privacy, your survey will be assigned a number and your name will not be used in any document.

Demographic Information
1. Your Sex: Female _________ Male___________
2- Your Age: __________________
3- Country of Origen: _______________________________________________________________
4- How much formal education do you have?
   □ I never went to school.
   □ I went to school until _____ grade.
   □ I graduated from high school.
   □ I attended college but did not graduate.
   □ I graduated from college.
   □ I completed graduate school.

5- How long have you lived in the United States? _________________________________________
6- Does your child qualify for a free or reduced school lunch?   YES ___________ NO__________
7- Age of the Child in Special Education: ________ 8- Child’s Sex: Female______ Male______
9- How old was your child at the time of the first IEP (Individualized Educational Plan)? __________

10- Check which disabilities are listed on your child’s IEP?
   □ Mental Disability   □ Orthopedic Impairment
   □ Developmental Delay   □ Autism
   □ Deafness/Blindness   □ Traumatic Brain Injury
   □ Deafness/Hearing Impairment   □ Other Health Impairment
   □ Speech or Language Impairment   □ Specific Learning Disabilities
   □ Blindness/Visual Impairment   □ Multiple Disabilities
   □ Emotional Disturbance

11- Do you have more than one child in special education?   YES _____ NO _____
This is a list of statements to find out more about your experiences while participating in your child’s special education process. Read each statement and indicate how often each of them describes your experiences (0= Never; 1= Rarely; 2= Frequently; 3= Always). There are not right or wrong answers. Mark one answer for each statement based on what you know.

1- I visit, call or send notes about my child to school.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

2- I tell teachers when I have a concern about my child.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

3- I ask teachers about school activities and events.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

4- I speak with my child’s teachers in English.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

5- I speak with teachers about my child’s progress.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

6- I attend my child’s IEP meetings.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

7- I tell teachers when I disagree with their decisions about programs and services for my child.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

8- At the IEP meeting, I let the teachers make most decisions about my child’s education.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

9- I use an interpreter to communicate with school staff during IEP meetings.
   0-----------1-----------2-----------3
   Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always

10- The teachers and I make decisions together about what is best for my child.
    0-----------1-----------2-----------3
    Never       Rarely     Frequently   Always
11- School personnel communicate with me regularly about my child’s needs and progress.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
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</table>

12- I understand how special education programs work.  

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
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13- I know about the special education services available to my child.  

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<tr>
<th>Never</th>
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<th>Always</th>
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14- Somebody at school explains the information discussed at the IEP meeting in a way I can understand.  

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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15- School personnel pay attention to my opinions about what my child needs.  

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<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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16- I believe that my child’s teachers may think that I am interfering too much with their work with my child.  

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<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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17- I have enough opportunities to communicate with my child’s teachers between IEP meetings.  

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<tr>
<th>Never</th>
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18- School personnel have a positive attitude towards my child and my family.  

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<tr>
<td>0</td>
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19- I think I understand my child’s disability.  

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<th>Never</th>
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<tr>
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20- I receive invitations to visit my child’s school for different events, not just IEP meetings.  

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<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
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21- I feel that the teachers speak down to me.  

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<th>Never</th>
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<tr>
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22- Having so many professionals present at the IEP meeting makes me uncomfortable.

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23- I trust all the teachers working with my child.

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24- I don’t want teachers to think that I am being disrespectful.

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25- I understand how American schools work.

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26- I have problems understanding the information shared in the IEP meetings.

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27- I feel uncomfortable asking questions because of my limited English.

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<th>Rarely</th>
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28- The teachers and I expect the same things from my child.

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<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
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29- Teachers understand my family’s culture or lifestyle.

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<th>Frequently</th>
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30- I understand what I am supposed to do during IEP meetings.

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31- I receive information about activities and events happening at my child’s school.

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<th>Frequently</th>
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32- I think that teachers know best about my child’s needs.

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<th>Frequently</th>
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33- I find it difficult to confront school personnel about my child’s educational needs.

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34- Teachers give me suggestions about how I can help my child at home.

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</table>
35- School personnel support my initiative to invite friends or relatives to my child’s IEP meetings for additional support.

0-----------1-----------2-----------3
Never       Rarely       Frequently    Always

Optional:
Please write any additional information that you would like to share about your participation in your child’s special education process.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
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Appendix H
Special Education Parent Participation Survey – SPED-PPS
Spanish Version

(Noticed Attached to Emailed and Mailed Surveys and Read to Parents during Survey)

Completion Meetings -Spanish

¡Atención!

La educación especial incluye clases y programas especiales, terapia del habla y de lenguaje, terapia ocupacional, educación física adaptada, y servicios de interpretación o traducción para alumnos sordos o con audición limitada, entre otros servicios. Las clases de inglés como segundo idioma (ESL) no son parte de educación especial.
Encuesta Sobre la Participación de los Padres en la Educación Especial de sus Hijos (SPED-PPS)

Por favor, marque una respuesta por cada pregunta de esta encuesta en base a lo que usted sabe. No hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas. La información que proporcione en esta encuesta es confidencial y sólo será utilizada para el propósito de este estudio. Para proteger su privacidad, a cada encuesta se le asignará un número y su nombre no aparecerá en ningún documento.

Información Demográfica

1. Su sexo: Femenino ______ Masculino _____ 2 - Su edad: __________________
3- País de Origen __________________ 4 - ¿Cuánta educación formal tiene?
   ___ Nunca fui a la escuela.
   ___ Fui a la escuela hasta el grado _____.
   ___ Me gradué de la escuela secundaria.
   ___ Fui a la universidad, pero no me gradué.
   ___ Me gradué de la universidad.
   ___ Realicé estudios de postgrado.

5- ¿Cuánto tiempo ha vivido en los Estados Unidos?_______________
6 - ¿Su hijo(a) califica para almuerzo escolar gratis o de precio reducido? Sí ___ No ___
7- Edad del niño(a) en educación especial: ________
8 - Sexo del niño(a): Femenino ______ Masculino______
9- ¿Qué edad tenía su hijo(a) al momento del primer IEP (Plan Educativo Individualizado)? __________

10 - Marque la discapacidad que aparece en el Plan Educativo Individual (IEP) de su hijo(a):
   ___ Retardo Mental
   ___ Impedimento Ortopédico
   ___ Retardo del Desarrollo
   ___ Sordera / ceguera
   ___ Sordera / deficiencia auditiva
   ___ Desorden del Habla o del lenguaje
   ___ Ceguera / Impedimento Visual
   ___ Trastornos Emocionales
   ___ Autismo
   ___ Lesión Cerebral Traumática
   ___ Otros Impedimentos de Salud
   ___ Dificultades Específicas del Aprendizaje
   ___ Impedimentos Múltiples

11- ¿Tiene usted más de un niño en educación especial? SI ____ NO ____
Esta es una lista de afirmaciones para conocer más de sus experiencias al participar en el proceso de educación especial de su hijo(a). Lea cada afirmación e indique con qué frecuencia cada una de ellas describe sus experiencias (0 = Nunca; 1 = Rara vez; 2 = Con frecuencia; 3 = Siempre). No hay respuestas correctas o incorrectas. Marque una respuesta para cada afirmación basado en lo que sabe.

1- Yo visito, llamo o envío notas a la escuela referente a mi hijo(a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nunca</th>
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2- Le digo a los maestros cuando tengo una preocupación o pregunta acerca de mi hijo(a).

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3- Le pregunto a los maestros sobre las actividades y eventos que se realizan en la escuela.

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4- Hablo con los maestros de mi hijo en inglés.

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5- Hablo con los maestros acerca del progreso académico de mi hijo(a).

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6- Asisto a las reuniones del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual) de mi hijo(a).

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7- Le digo a los maestros cuando no estoy de acuerdo con sus decisiones acerca de los programas y servicios para mi hijo(a).

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8- En la reunión del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual), permito que los maestros tomen la mayoría de las decisiones sobre la educación de mi hijo(a).

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9- Uso un intérprete para comunicarme con los maestros y el personal de la escuela durante las reuniones del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual).

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10- Los maestros y yo tomamos las decisiones sobre lo que es mejor para mi hijo(a) juntos.

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11- El personal de la escuela se comunica conmigo acerca de las necesidades y progreso de mi hijo.

12- Entiendo cómo funcionan los programas de educación especial.

13- Sé de los servicios de educación especial disponibles para mi hijo(a).

14- Alguien en la escuela, me explica la información discutida en la reunión del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual) en una forma que puedo entender.

15- El personal de la escuela presta atención a mis opiniones acerca de lo que mi hijo necesita.

16- Creo que los maestros pueden pensar que estoy interfiriendo demasiado en su trabajo con mi hijo(a).

17- Tengo suficientes oportunidades para comunicarme con los maestros de mi hijo(a) fuera de las reuniones del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual).

18- El personal de la escuela tiene una actitud positiva hacia mi hijo(a) y mi familia.

19- Creo que entiendo bien la discapacidad de mi hijo(a).

20- Recibo invitaciones para visitar la escuela de mi hijo(a) para diferentes eventos, no sólo para que asista a la reunión del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual).

21- Los maestros me hacen sentir inferior cuando me hablan.
22- El tener tantos profesionales presentes en la reunión del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual) me hace sentir incómodo(a).

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23- Confío en todos los maestros que trabajan con mi hijo(a).

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24- No quiero que los maestros piensen que estoy siendo irrespetuoso(a).

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25 - Entiendo cómo funcionan las escuelas en los Estados Unidos.

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26- Tengo dificultad comprendiendo la información que me dan en las reuniones del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual).

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27- Me siento incómodo(a) haciendo preguntas porque mi inglés es limitado.

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28- Los maestros y yo esperamos lo mismo de mi hijo(a).

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29- Los maestros entienden el estilo de vida y cultura de mi familia.

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30 - Entiendo lo que tengo que hacer durante las reuniones del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual).

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31- Recibo información sobre actividades y eventos que tienen lugar en la escuela de mi hijo(a).

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32 - Creo que los maestros entienden mejor las necesidades de mi hijo(a) que yo.

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33 - Me resulta difícil confrontar al personal de la escuela acerca las necesidades educativas de mi hijo(a).

0-------------------1-------------------2-------------------3
Nunca             Rara vez            Con frecuencia            Siempre

34 - Los maestros me dan sugerencias acerca de cómo puedo ayudar a mi hijo(a) en la casa.

0-------------------1-------------------2-------------------3
Nunca             Rara vez            Con frecuencia            Siempre

35 - El personal de la escuela apoya mi iniciativa de invitar amigos o familiares a las reuniones del IEP (Plan Educativo Individual).

0-------------------1-------------------2-------------------3
Nunca             Rara vez            Con frecuencia            Siempre

Opcional:
Por favor, escriba cualquier información adicional que le gustaría compartir acerca de su participación en el proceso de educación especial de su hijo(a).
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## Appendix I

### SPED-PPS Experiences Section

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<tr>
<th>Content Domain</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ knowledge of the American education system</td>
<td>12, 13, 19, 25, 30, 31</td>
<td>Al-Hassan &amp; Gardner III, 2002; Bailey et al., 1999; Fish, 2006, 2008; Hughes et al., 2008; Harry, 2002; Hill &amp; Torres, 2010; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Lake &amp; Billingsley, 2000; Lian &amp; Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Olmstead et al., 2010; Olivos, 2009; Span et al., 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-school communication</td>
<td>11, 14, 17, 20, 22, 26</td>
<td>Fish, 2006; Lake &amp; Billingsley, 2000; Lian &amp; Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Mueller et al., 2008; Ramirez, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ perception of school personnel</td>
<td>15, 18, 21, 23, 28, 29, 34, 35</td>
<td>Blue-Banning, Turnbull, &amp; Pereira, 2000; Fish, 2006, 2008; Hughes et al., 2008; Kozleski et al., 2008; Lake &amp; Billingsley, 2000; Mueller et al., 2008; Perreira, Chapman, &amp; Stein, 2006; Ramirez, 2003; Span et al., 2003; Wagner &amp; Katsiyannis, 2010; Zionts et al., 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ perceptions of their own role in their children’s education</td>
<td>16, 24, 32, 33</td>
<td>Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur et al., 2008; Lake &amp; Billingsley, 2000; Lian &amp; Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Ramirez, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language communication skills</td>
<td>4, 9, 27</td>
<td>Langdon, 2009; Lian &amp; Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Ramirez, 2003; Salas, 2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VITA

María Isolina Ruiz was born and raised in Venezuela, where she completed her undergraduate studies in Special Education at the Colegio Universitario de Psicopedagogía in 1990. She moved to the United States in 1993, earning a Master in Science degree in Special Education from Southern Connecticut State University in 1996 and a Doctor in Philosophy degree in Special Education from the University of New Orleans in 2012. In her more than 20 years of professional experience, María has worked extensively with children, adolescents, and adults with mild, moderate, and significant disabilities. She has experience as training consultant and instructional strategist. María has presented at local, national, and international conferences on a wide array of special education issues including, but not limited to, teaching and behavior management strategies, Response-to-Intervention, assessment of English language learners, and parental participation in the special education process. Her research interests include the implementation fidelity of school-based behavioral and academic interventions, parent-school collaboration, effective teaching strategies used with students with disabilities, and factors affecting parents’ decisions regarding the education of their children with disabilities and participation in the special education process. She has published articles on training school staff to conduct behavioral interventions with fidelity. She is a member of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), Division of Early Childhood (DEC), and Teachers of English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL).