

# The Voices of Latino Families Raising Children With Special Needs

Marie Tejero Hughes

*Department of Special Education  
University of Illinois at Chicago*

Diana Martinez Valle-Riestra

*Department of Educational and Psychological Studies  
Florida International University*

Maria Elena Arguelles

*Educational Consultant, Miami, Florida*

In this study we examined the perceptions of 16 Latino families regarding their views and experiences raising a child with special needs and their involvement in their child's schooling. Families talked about treating their child like a "normal child" regardless of the child's unique needs, but they also stated that their level of involvement was different compared to raising their other children. All families shared their expectations for their child, with most wanting their child to reach a level of independence. Overall, families were satisfied with the special education program; however, some families were concerned with the progress their child was making.

Key words: family, Latino, special education, parental involvement, disabilities, urban school

Families report that having a child with special needs is a unique parenting experience that can have a great impact on the family, can be a source of ongoing stress, and can disrupt the family's routine (e.g., Gallimore, Bernheimer, & Weisner,

1999; Sobsey, 1996). Family responses to having a child with special needs vary in respect to their unique characteristics, situations, and cultural backgrounds, with many experiencing positive feelings (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005; Ingstad & Whyte, 1995; Valle-Riestra, 1998). Families who are initially confronted with the diagnosis of their child's disability can become overwhelmed by the experience and display a multitude of reactions depending on the nature and severity of the disability (Pearl, 1993; Valle-Riestra & Hughes, 2007). Many families initially go through a period characterized by adaptation, adjustment, and acceptance, and eventually the development of realistic expectations, goals, and services for their child (Kummerer, Lopez-Reyna, & Hughes, 2007; Parker & Zuckerman, 1990).

Involving families in the education of their children is especially valued by schools and is highly supported by the field of special education through its basic inherent processes of parental consent, informed consent, procedural safeguards, and the establishment of an individualized written plan for the child (e.g., Powell & Diamond, 1995). The spirit of federal laws argues for the establishment of a working, collaborative relationship between the home and the school by referring to families as "partners," "protectors," and "advocators" for their children (Zetlin, Padron, & Wilson, 1996). In its most ideal sense, the family is to be considered an equal and significant partner with the school. The home and school each bring its own expertise. The home brings its unique perspectives on the strengths of the families and their needs (e.g., Harry et al., 2005), whereas the school's expertise is based on theory, research, and practice (e.g., Powell & Diamond, 1995). However, it is important to note that the equity and advocacy expectations for family participation in the special education decision-making process at times are in direct conflict with the values and beliefs held by many families from culturally diverse backgrounds (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000), thus making it difficult for many families to engage in ways the school encourages and expects.

## INVOLVING LATINO FAMILIES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

As the largest and the fastest growing minority group in the United States, Latinos are projected to constitute a quarter of the U.S. population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Although Latinos share a common language base, they are a diverse group of individuals with a variety of cultural values, beliefs, ideals, and customs and can be considered distinct populations that differ in demography and history (Suarez-Orozco, 1987). However, Latinos do widely share similar *cultural models*, which are "shared mental schema or normative understandings of how the world works or ought to work" (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001, p. 47). For most Latinos, there is a great importance placed on family, and one of the most distinctive and enduring cultural characteristics of this ethnic group is a strong sense of

“familism” (Cortes, 1995). Also, many Latinos “cherish the idea of a large, extended family” (Gonzalez-Alvarez, 1998, p. 74), being able to stay close to family, and assisting one another in times of need (Zuniga, 1992). What is also important for most Latinos is formal education, considered a worthwhile endeavor, which ultimately is a vehicle for economic mobility and leads to increased levels of motivation and involvement (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). Though Latinos may widely share these similar cultural models, these shared models can produce varying cultural practices among individual Latinos depending on features specific to their social contexts (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001).

One of the many challenges for the Latino family, then, is the task of parenting a child in a bicultural environment—the home culture and the larger society. There exists a constant struggle for promoting feelings of self-worth within the home culture while at the same time having to develop competencies in the other, newer culture (Julian, McKenry, & McKelvey, 1994). The body of research on Latino families with children with special needs is sparse when compared to the number of Latino children identified with disabilities. Some findings related to this population have included a perceived lack of parental participation in parent programs and lack of utilization of services (Heller, Markwardt, Rowitz, & Farber, 1994). However, other research has documented how Latino parents are involved in their child’s education and supportive of the special education program (Hughes, Schumm, & Vaughn, 1998; Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002). In general, Latinos want to be involved in the educational decision-making process of their children, but many feel silenced or marginalized by overt or covert messages that indicate that their voices are not always valued or welcomed (Salas, 2004).

It is interesting that the reaction of Latino families to having a child with special needs can vary significantly from that of members of other cultures and ethnicities. In a study conducted by Skinner, Bailey, Correa, and Rodriguez (1999), most Latino mothers viewed having a child with special needs as bringing about positive transformations in their lives. Families have also described having a child with special needs as an opportunity to grow to be good parents and valuable individuals (Skinner et al., 1999; Valle-Riestra & Hughes, 2007). The coping mechanisms of Latino families seem to be closely tied to the availability of family support. In many cases, extended family provide assistance in various ways, such as through child care (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994; Planos, Zayas, & Busch-Rossnagel, 1997). In one study, mothers who had no extended family in the United States were depressed and were less able to cope with their child’s disability (Blacher, Lopez, Shapiro, & Fusco, 1997). However, caution must be taken in the interpretation of these studies because there is great variability in the Latino community in reference to coping with raising a child with special needs (Bailey et al., 1999).

Given that the field of special education has indicated that the home and school relationship is an essential one, educators need to become familiar with the different cultures they work with. Research findings suggest that although there is not

much difference in the amount or degree of parental involvement among parents from different racial or ethnic groups, there are variations in the type of involvement Latinos engage in (Osterling & Garza, 2004). For example, special educators can recognize the importance of the extended family in the Latino culture and understand that often aunts or grandparents may accompany parents to staffings or parent conferences (Harry, 2002). From a larger perspective that goes beyond special education service delivery, the active participation of Latino parents in their children's education is necessary for the strengthening of native language development and for the communication of high expectations and social-emotional support regarding academic achievement (Buisse, Castro, West, & Skinner, 2005).

The Latino population is growing at unprecedented rates in the United States, and the rate is even faster for children younger than the age of 18, with this group representing the largest minority child population in the nation (Morse, 2003). This increase has translated into larger numbers of Latino children with special needs meeting eligibility for and requiring special education services in public schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). In addition to the challenges posed by their disabilities, this growing number of children face many other challenges, including communicating in two languages and accommodating two cultures (Rueda, Monzo, Shapiro, Gomez, & Blacher, 2005). Therefore, more than ever, Latino families and teachers have to learn to work together for the mutual benefit of the children. Although the families and teachers might have differing cultural models and expectations, there are several shared features in these models around which the two groups can collaborate, with many features complementary across models (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). Understanding the concerns, needs, and priorities of Latino families with children with special needs and successfully addressing those concerns is becoming a critical necessity. This understanding is also an important step in the development and delivery of needed and welcome changes in the home and school relationship. Given these circumstances, it is important to more closely examine the perceptions of Latino families raising children with special needs in order to refine how the field can better meet the needs of these children and their families. In this study, we were specifically interested in learning more about Latino families' views on raising a child with special needs, their expectations and goals for their child with special needs, and their experiences with their child's schooling.

## METHOD

### Participants

All participating families had children with special needs attending a predominantly Latino (92%) elementary school in a large, urban school district where most

of the children at the school (84%) were on free or reduced lunch. A large number of the staff were also Latino, including the principal, who had previously been a special education teacher, and approximately 49% of the full-time and 73% of the part-time staff. All Latino families with at least one child with special needs were invited to participate in a larger study focusing on special education services. A subgroup of families ( $n = 16$ ) was purposively selected (e.g., range of disabilities, age of child) to participate in this interview from the 44 families (52% of eligible families at the school) who agreed to participate in the larger study. The mother was identified by each of the families as the primary caregiver of the child with special needs and participated in the interview. Other adult family members (e.g., fathers, grandparents) were encouraged to participate in the interviews. The majority of the families ( $n = 14$ ) preferred to be interviewed in Spanish. However, 63% of mothers indicated that they spoke English well or with little difficulty. This was a diverse group of mothers who had lived in the United States for an average of 16 years (range = 1–35 years), with one mother having been born in the United States (see Table 1). The families had children representing various disabilities and ages (see Table 2).

## Interview

The semistructured interview is an appropriate and highly used instrument in family research because it is suited to understanding the experiences, meanings, and interpretations families assign to events in their lives (Daly, 1992). Specifically, in

TABLE 1  
Place of Birth and Occupation  
of Parents ( $N = 16$ )

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n</i>
Mother's place of birth	
Caribbean	8
Central America	4
South America	3
United States	1
Mother's occupation	
Skilled	6
Does not work outside of home	6
Manual labor	4
Father's occupation	
Vocational	4
Skilled	3
Does not work outside of home	3
Professional	1
Not part of household	5

TABLE 2  
Children's Demographic Information  
(*N* = 16)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>n</i>
Age	
4–7 years	9
8–11 years	7
Primary disability	
Cognitive delayed	6
Autism	3
Learning disability	3
Physical impairment	2
Speech/language delay	1
Visual impairment	1
Language child prefers to speak	
Spanish	5
English	4
fautoBoth	5
Does not speak	2

this study the semistructured interview was developed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of Latino families raising a child with special needs. The interview consisted of 13 open-ended questions that were organized around topical issues directly linked to the study's focus, as well as appropriate follow-up probes. Although interviews were structured by topic, a balanced degree of flexibility and informality was encouraged to elicit novel and unanticipated data (Fetterman, 1989; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Examples of questions included "What role/responsibility do you believe parents should have in their child's education?" and "What do you believe are some factors/things that facilitate parental participation at the school?" Bilingual Latino researchers conducted the interviews at the family's home, with interviews lasting approximately 75 min.

### Data Analysis

Bilingual researchers analyzed the data in the original language of the interviews. Data from interviews were gathered and coded using qualitative methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is known to provide an appropriate avenue for families' voices (Jarrett, 1992). As suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), three flows of analysis were used to summarize the qualitative data from the interviews. The first flow involved independent, line-by-line analysis of transcripts by the researchers, identification of salient and relevant information, and open coding. The second flow of analysis included further sorting of informa-

tion into categories and units with similar content for the initial development of data summaries for each major theme (i.e., communication, parental involvement, parenting philosophy). Categories and themes were continuously reviewed for exhaustiveness and consistency by the researchers, and findings were negotiated using the group mind process (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Rules were revised as needed, and themes were reviewed for interrelationships among categories, overlaps, and completeness. The third flow of analysis involved drawing conclusions and verifying findings. Contradictory evidence was examined, and firmly established conclusions are reported. Findings are summarized around themes that emerged in the analysis and supported by representative quotations.

Reliability issues were addressed by constructing clear research questions, linking a theoretical foundation to the purposes of the study, incorporating three independent researchers in data coding and analysis, and collecting data from multiple families. Objectivity was confirmed by describing in detail general methods and procedures used in the study, following a set of prescribed steps during data analysis, and discussing possible biases and assumptions through research team meetings. The above procedures and standards for quality in qualitative research were suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

## FINDINGS

Although the families we interviewed shared many of the same cultural models, each family's experiences and practices were also quite unique. Data analysis identified three primary themes: raising a child with special needs, expectations and goals for the child, and experiences with schooling. Findings are presented below in relation to these, as they emerged across most of the families. The families' voices regarding these issues are apparent in the sample responses presented. All responses that were in Spanish were translated into English by a native Spanish speaker and back-translated to ensure accuracy. Also, to provide a fuller portrait of families' experiences raising a child with special needs, two family descriptions are provided. All names have been changed to ensure the confidentiality of the families.

### Raising a Child With Special Needs

Most families acknowledged that their child had a disability that required special services, and in some instances they were able to articulate that they understood their child was not a typical child. However, families indicated that recognition of the disability did not mean that they treated their child differently from other children. In other words, the majority of families shared that they *treated their child like a "normal child"* regardless of the child's unique needs. Ms. Reyes stated, "I

know he is [a] child with special needs. I understand, but I always treat him as if he was a normal child.” Other parents agreed with this statement, as did Ms. Zamora: “I treat my son as if he was normal. I never put any limits on him just because he is a child with special needs.”

The majority of families shared that their level of involvement in their child’s life and education was different in terms of *it being more intense and difficult, it requiring more time commitment, and their needing to be more aware* of what the child needs. “I think that Luis, since he is a child with special needs, requires more attention and that one has to pay more attention to him,” responded Ms. Moreno. Other parents had similar comments, including Ms. Navarro, who stated, “I know that their education is different and the work that is involved is a lot more intense,” and Ms. Medina, who replied as follows:

I feel that it is different to have a son with special needs, because at times there are parents that because they do not have children with problems just leave them alone and do not pay more attention to them if something or other happens.

In addition, many families did indicate an *overall feeling of worry, frustration, sadness, or helplessness when dealing with their children*. Ms. Reyes shared her concerns:

I’m so afraid when he goes to school. They don’t feed him enough because he always comes home hungry. I’m worried about him being able to pick up the spoon, the fork, the glass. How can I help him so he can go to the bathroom? ... I’m worried about everything as he gets older. I’m afraid.

### Expectations and Goals for the Child

All families shared with us expectations and goals they had established for their child with special needs. The majority of the families maintained that their primary goal for their child was making sure that they *reached a level of independence* by adapting to the environment. Ms. Sevilla captured this theme:

For him to be independent. I don’t want him to be a rocket scientist or anything like that, I just want him to be able to know when I leave this world he would be able to survive without me. I don’t care if he is a delayed student, I just want to know he can sign, he can do his groceries that he can understand, he can pay his rent, and that he can hold a job, just very normal living skills.

Other goals and expectations identified by the families included *improvements in both physical and academic abilities*. Physical goals dealt with children being able to walk and eat, whereas academic goals centered on increasing or improving



the child's speech/communication, writing, and reading skills. The families shared comments such as the one from Ms. Jimenez: "I just want her to walk better . . . that is my wish that she can do that. That she can throw, swim, do all the things, that is what I want physical[ly], you know that she improves." Ms. Gomez commented, "I would like for him to express himself more. That he would communicate and express himself in a way that I would understand." Another parent, Ms. Flores, stated, "I would like for him to improve his writing. He does not like to write . . . I have many hopes."

### Family Involvement in Schooling

As families described their children and their expectations for them, they also shared their views on family involvement in education and their perceptions of their child's special education program. The majority of the parents were generally *satisfied with their child's educational program*; however, four families did indicate that they were not satisfied with the progress their child was making. Ms. Jimenez stated, "For me everything is perfect. I am in agreement with my daughter's progress; I see that she is improving." The overwhelmingly majority of families did indicate that parenting children meant involvement and support in everything, and this should be the same level with all children, normal as well as disabled. "Parents should be really involved as much as they can. I try to dedicate as much as possible," stated Ms. Gomez. The rationale families provided for this view was that they believed families are the "primary" individuals in a child's life because they have the capacity to communicate, inform, and ask questions. As Ms. Sevilla expressed, parents play "the primary role, more so than the educators. You can't leave it all up to the school."

Although families shared that involvement was critical for all children regardless of disability, the majority did state that their *level of involvement for children with special needs as compared to other children was different*. The differences described converged around issues of awareness, intensity, and time commitment. "One has to be paying attention—truly paying attention—to what is going on with your child," stated Ms. Volero. Ms. Moreno added, "Families of children with special needs need to pay more attention to everything."

The most frequently identified school involvement activities included attending school meetings and conferences and visiting the child's classroom. When describing her involvement with the school, Ms. Sevilla stated, "I have had a number of meetings with the teachers including teachers from last year, the psychologist, [and] the principal to see how he is advancing." Many of the family involvement activities took place naturally during the course of daily routines, much like Ms. Navarro describes: "A lot of times I do it [visit the classroom] when I am dropping him off. I take the time to stick around a little bit and have a chance to talk to the teacher and all that." Families expounded upon the importance of meeting in per-

son with their child's teacher and indicated that they wanted more meetings and more opportunities to observe their child in the classroom. "They send me notes. A suggestion is that they invite me to participate as an observer to see how the kid develops in class," remarked Ms. Romano. Another parent, Ms. Flores, said it this way: "I am happy with the communication. They always get an interpreter to translate the conversations I have with the teachers that don't speak Spanish." Ms. Navarro also stated, "It's important that parents and teachers make appointments to communicate in person." Some families believed it is the school's responsibility to educate families about special education programs, services, and processes, and to provide workshops, seminars, and contacts and resources available in the community. Ms. Medina stated, "It is important that from the beginning they explain to the families what is an [individualized education program] meeting."

About half of the families provided advice regarding ways to improve the home and school relationship. Of these, some suggestions related to the amount of communication, others to the mode, and still others to the topic of the communication that should exist between home and school. Several families raised concerns regarding how often teachers communicated with them. A father, Mr. Artilles, said, "Teachers should write letters to the families to explain what is happening in the classroom." This group of families was concerned with being kept abreast of their child's progress and classroom activities on a consistent basis. "Communication has to be constant. I just need to know what goes on at all times. To know all about his condition and have open conversations with his teachers," remarked Ms. Moreno.

Besides school activities, families frequently talked about involvement in terms of assisting their children by reading to them, helping them with homework, and/or providing extended learning activities at home. Ms. Flores described what she does on a daily basis: "Learning his alphabet. Writing his alphabet. Writing his name [and] the numbers to 100. Adding with beans or any object. Teaching him how to read numbers and words like *hat*, *cat*, and *rat*." Ms. Rodriguez did activities with her daughter that the teacher sends home:

They send me many folders. For example, now I have one that has a pile of pictures and she needs to show me what they are. The teachers tell me to practice with her until she can learn how to say them and so that I can understand her.

### Family Experiences

Although the families we talked to shared many similar perceptions and experiences as noted above, as would be expected each family had its own unique circumstances that impacted its views of raising a child with special needs. To provide a richer description of the families, we highlight two families, the Zamoras and Gonzalezes, who were fairly typical of the families we interviewed.

*Zamora family.* Yamil is a 5-year-old boy who lives with his 4-year-old sister, an older half-sister, and both of his parents. Yamil and his mother arrived from the Dominican Republic a little over a year ago. His father and sisters followed a few months later. Mr. Zamora had a job that required him to travel and be away from home for most of the year. After Yamil was diagnosed with autism, Mr. Zamora decided to resign so he could be closer to the family. He has still not found work here in the United States. Ms. Zamora is a housewife and does not work outside the home. Ms. Zamora explained that she does not speak English well: "I do not speak English. My English is poor." Mr. Zamora says that he knows a few words of English.

Yamil enjoys music, likes animals, likes to look at and play with books, and is eager to learn how to use computers. Ms. Zamora describes him as temperamental and says it takes him a long time to adapt to new situations. The Zamoras' biggest concern and immediate priority is Yamil's significant language delay. His mother explained, "He is almost 6 years old, and he only uses about 30 words." At school he receives speech therapy in a small group twice a week, but his parents believe he would greatly benefit from intense, one-on-one speech therapy on a daily basis. They assert that if they could afford it, they would pay for private speech therapy sessions. Overall, the family is happy with Yamil's placement, program, and school. His parents noticed improvement and progress during the last school year. His mother said, "I really liked last year's program, excellent teachers, he learned more. I saw him more outgoing, with less fear. He shared with children and adults."

Ms. Zamora is satisfied with the current level of communication between home and school. She explained, "They always try to help you or when I see a problem with my child, I speak with them and they give you a suggestion." She often asks the teachers for advice because she believes the teachers are the experts in this field. She has often used one of the classroom aides to assist with language translation when speaking with Yamil's teacher. However, when the aide was unavailable, she said she and the teacher were able to communicate and "they understood each other."

When asked to describe the time when she first learned of Yamil's diagnosis, Ms. Zamora said, "It was a difficult year. It was a year that required much work." She had just arrived to the United States from the Dominican Republic on her own without knowing the language. She had to deal with several agencies, which in her opinion were very slow to assist her. She said, "I cried, I begged, I asked." She was very concerned because she saw how the months would pass without any services being provided for her son. When she finally attended the first meeting to discuss Yamil's placement, Ms. Zamora stated that she did not speak or ask any questions. She explained that she was "very impressionable. I was scared. I did not know what type of school my child would be placed in."

Ms. Zamora explains that she communicates often with both of her children's teachers but that she worries more about Yamil. She is trying to learn as much as

she can about autism, always reading articles and books. She and her husband spend a great part of their day trying to teach Yamil new phrases and words. They believe it is their duty to provide Yamil with discipline and structure so that when he goes to school he is not “like a donkey or like a savage animal.” Their main hopes for Yamil are to see improvement in his language development and that he begins writing some words. They are concerned about Yamil’s placement for next year, what teacher he will have, and the level of students he will be interacting with. They hope that he will be placed with students who will be positive role models and from whom he can learn.

*Gonzalez family.* Carmencita is an 8-year-old girl living with her mother and older brother. Carmencita received a medical diagnosis of cerebral palsy at around 6 to 8 months of age, and her disability category at school is listed as trainable mentally handicapped, which Ms. Gonzalez says was difficult to accept at first. Ms. Gonzalez is a single mother who arrived from Cuba more than 10 years ago. Her significant other viewed Carmencita and her problems “as a burden” and left the family. The mother also has recently been assigned to work the night shift (5 p.m. to 1 a.m.), and this concerns her deeply. She shared, “I have to work, but because of the hours I don’t like it. I tell the lady [her boss] to give me the morning shift, so I can drop off [Carmencita] in school with no worry, pick her up ... there is no problem.... I can be with her.”

Carmencita loves to watch talk shows on television and is described by Ms. Gonzalez as an intelligent and cooperative child with limited verbal and independent skills. Ms. Gonzalez shared this anecdote about Carmencita: “She knows how to dial her father’s telephone number. She calls him. Although she doesn’t speak, she listens to his voice and she says things that he doesn’t understand but he knows that it is her.” Ms. Gonzalez views her child as “special” and feels that the majority of Carmencita’s problems are medical in nature, specifically with controlling the movements of her arms and hands. “I don’t know, I think that the problem with the girl is medical. I would like the therapists to see her more often ... so she can improve.” The mother is satisfied with Carmencita’s current school, placement, and the progress she has made: “I am satisfied with the changes because I see a lot of change [in her].” She believes that Carmencita has a good teacher and is satisfied with the level and types of communication established between the home and the school. The teacher sends notes home on a regular basis in both English and Spanish, calls the mother, and sends a variety of activities to assist Carmencita at home (i.e., communication board). As the mother shared, “She [the teacher] keeps me informed ... she calls me here at home or at work.” Ms. Gonzalez describes herself as an involved parent because she attends meetings scheduled at school, communicates with school personnel, and actively engages in instructional and self-help activities with her child at home. She commented, “They send me packets for example ... now I have one that has a lot of pictures and she [Carmencita] shows me

what she wants [by pointing], and they tell me to practice it with her. And there are more things, like going to the bathroom with her.”

## DISCUSSION

We set out in this study to listen to the voices of Latino families regarding their views on raising a child with special needs, their expectations for their child, and their experiences with their child’s schooling. The families we talked to indicated that as much as possible they tried not to focus on their child’s disability, but instead they tried to treat the child with special needs the same as they do their other children. These families, however, did share that their level of involvement in their child’s life and schooling was different compared to for the other children in terms of it being more intense and difficult, it requiring more of a time commitment, and their needing to be more aware of the child’s needs. All families thought about the future and expressed their expectations and goals for their child, with most wanting the child to reach a level of independence by adapting to the environment. Wanting their children to acquire basic life skills and develop social and academic skills is what most families want, regardless of cultural background or children’s abilities or needs (Rueda et al., 2005).

The families were generally satisfied with their child’s school, but families did indicate that they would welcome an increase in specific types of communication between the home and the school. Families wanted the school to communicate more with them about classroom activities and expressed frustration with communication, citing in many cases their limited English skills as the primary source of difficulty. Many families stated that at times they felt out of touch with what was going on in school and were unaware of what they could do to assist their children. Furthermore, families indicated that they wanted the school to provide them with guidance on what they needed to be doing to assist their children and to instruct them on how to do it. Families also wanted the school to provide them with concrete and specific suggestions on how they can assist their children at home, particularly when school activities are noted as challenging to their children. When schools provide families with these types of specific suggestions and show them how to do the activities, it enhances the families’ participation in their children’s learning (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999; Goldenberg & Arzubiaga, 1994). The fact that families continued to express concerns about aspects of their child’s schooling even though in general they stated they were satisfied with school has also been noted by others working with families (e.g., Renty & Roeyers, 2006). Although the experiences of these families we interviewed cannot be generalized to all Latino families, similar findings have been noted in other studies that have been conducted with similar populations (e.g., Harry, 1992; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Rueda et al., 2005; Zetlin et al., 1996).

As educators we need to develop programs that target the unique needs, values, and beliefs of Latino families, but in order to do this we need to know more about Latino families and check to see if programs we design and implement are appropriate (Maldonado-Molina, Reyes, & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2006). We have to incorporate approaches that will allow educators to recognize the cultural underpinnings of their own practice and move toward a more effective collaboration model that requires reciprocity and focuses on relationship building (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Furthermore, we must address the need that educators have to increase their cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills in order to provide appropriate services that are culturally meaningful and relevant to Latinos (e.g., Salas-Provence, Erickson, & Reed, 2002). There is a great need for understanding the context of families, along with recognizing families' cultural backgrounds. Interaction between educators and parents must include knowledge of and respect for families' cultural values and beliefs in order to find common ground to help the child (Diken, 2006). As such, this study provides educators with insight into Latino families' views of raising a child with special needs and their experiences with their child's schooling. Such insights, in turn, can allow educators to develop activities that draw on what Latino families know and do, thus increasing the likelihood of families increasing their engagement in their child's education and sustaining this involvement over time. Families want schools to assist them in serving as facilitators of knowledge for their children.

Care should be exercised in generalizing these findings to other families of children with special needs or to other Latino families. We cannot assert to have recruited a representative sample of Latino families given that participants were recruited from one school and drawn from those who were willing to participate. Nevertheless, there was a pattern of uniformity in the responses of the families, which at first may seem remarkable given the differences across the group. But it is important to note that despite differences, all of these families shared a general cultural model that influenced their thinking in similar directions on broad issues such as their perceptions of childrearing (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). We would predict that specific differences might have emerged if we had focused on observing what families actually did within their homes.

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