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### THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE REALITY OF HISPANIC LIFE IN THE US

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#### *Abstract*

Utilizing a Community-Based Participatory Research model, a faculty member of a local university school of social work completed a qualitative needs assessment study either individually interviewed or facilitated focus groups to discover thirty-five immigrant Hispanic parents' perceived view of raising children in a small town of Northeast Pennsylvania, U.S.A. The interviews or the focus groups incorporated two components: 1. demographic information and 2) the Kansas Parental Satisfaction Scale (KPS) which included additional questions on the socio-economic-cultural integration process in the U.S. and intergenerational acculturation issues at home. The study found that Hispanic parents identified a disconnect between the American Dream and the reality of minority life in the U.S. Their acculturation stressors are the language barrier, long working hours, poverty, deficient bilingual services, lack of understanding of the U.S. school system, and institutional racism and discrimination. Collaboration is integral to social work practice and education. The study findings will lead to: 1)implementing an action model by offering bilingual (English & Spanish) parent information classes, 2) the recognition that a long-term commitment is necessary for community-university collaboration to sustain the viability of the Hispanic parents' outreach program, and 3) the development of culturally diverse venues of inter-professional partnerships for social work, psychology, education and other members from diverse disciplines in the university in order to sustain the Hispanic parents outreach programs in the future.

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**Keywords:** Immigrant Hispanics in the U.S., Acculturation, The U.S. Education System, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), University-Community Collaboration.



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## 1. Introduction

Historically, Hispanics have been America's most urbanized ethnic or racial group. A decision by national corporations to shift operations from urban settings and immigrant Hispanics' willingness to take the unattractive work that native workers avoid are reflected in the Hispanic population growth in rural communities, and this shift influences the shape of the national and global economy (Popke, 2011; Farmer & Moon, 2009; Lichter, Parisi, Grice, & Taquino, 2007). However, culturally and racially exclusive small towns and communities have not seen immigrant Hispanics as their priority to invest in human capital development by offering basic education, language acquisition (ESL classes), and cultural integration services. In addition, ill-equipped resources of the local public school system are not ready to provide quality education for the Hispanic students and their parents in their small communities (Dondero & Muller, 2012; Olivos & Mendoza, 2010).

## 2. Problem Statement

Hispanic students in the U.S. have the lowest level of educational attainment of any minority group, with a high school dropout rate that is twice that of Black and four times that of White students (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Critics have argued that Latino students' low academic performance is due to their parent's minimal expectations from their children. Perhaps, Hispanic parents' lack of faith in the instrumental value of schooling and their negative experiences with the U.S. institutions could lead immigrant Hispanic parents to transmit diminished aspirations and expectations to their children. However, Raleigh & Kao (2010); Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier's (2001) study report that Hispanic immigrant parents do hold high educational aspirations, so they do encourage their children to pursue formal schooling beyond high school. Marrero (2016) and Toldson & Lemmons' (2013) studies suggest that local schools need to be more culturally responsive to parents of Hispanic students to create a more inviting school environment as well as broadening the definition of parental involvement. Hill and Torres (2010) and Sy and Romero's (2008) explain that Hispanic parents' language barrier, poverty, lack of understanding of the U.S. education system, and inability to support the financial cost to obtain educational activities are obstacles for Hispanic students' performance in their schools. Thus, educators should not presume that Hispanic parents are not involved or not interested in their children's education because they are not frequently participating in school related events or are unable to send their children for extracurricular educational activities (Suizzo, et al., 2012).

## 3. Research Questions

The interviews or the focus groups incorporated two components by the authors: 1. demographic information and 2) the Kansas Parental Satisfaction Scale (KPS) questions: a) Parent's experience with their children's schools, b) Parent's comfort level to help with homework, c) Parent's satisfaction level with children's academic achievement, d) Parent's obstacles in raising children in the U.S., e) Parent's perception of their relationship with their children, and f) Parent's self-satisfaction with parenting. In addition, the authors asked questions on the socio-economic-cultural integration process in the U.S. and intergenerational acculturation issues at home.

#### 4. Purpose of the Study

Utilizing a community based participatory research (CBPR) model the primary purpose of this study is: 1) to discover the subjective view of Hispanic parents' living experiences in the Northeast, Pennsylvania, U.S. as related to access to local school system, 2) to collect the voices of the Hispanic parents about their cultural and educational acculturation in their communities and then 3) to develop community capacity and to build a community-university collaborative partnership.

#### 5. Research Methods

**Design:** Utilizing the qualitative methodology of an empowerment need assessment and community-university action model included individual interviews and focus group sessions for Hispanic parents. **The Samples:** The study samples were chosen using a purposive sampling method. The bilingual (English-Spanish) community leader recruited 35 samples from the local church members who self-identified as Hispanic parents and who had experiential knowledge related to the intended study.

**The Focus Group Session Interviews:** A Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)-certified bilingual (English and Spanish) moderator facilitated individual interviews or focus group sessions, lasting between 40 and 60 minutes each. All the participants listened to the Spanish language consent form information which explained the nature of the study, indicated the voluntary nature of their participation, and cautioned participants not to use identifying information during the discussion.(Table 01).

**Table 01.** Demographics of Individual Hispanic Participants: (N=35: Male=11 Female=24)

<b>Age</b>	20-30	2	5.7%
	31-40	16	45.7 %
	41 and over	17	48.6 %
<b>Average years of living in the U.S.</b>	18.5 years		
<b>Ethnic origin of participants</b>	Mexico	25	71.4%
	Dominican Republic	4	11.4%
	Puerto Rico	3	8.57%
	Columbia	1	2.86 %
	Costa Rica	1	2.86%
	Brazil	1	2.86 %
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	18	51.4 %
	Married	15	42.9 %
	Separated	2	5.7 %
	Divorced	-	
	Widowed	-	
<b>Primary Language</b>	Spanish only	23	65.7 %
	English only	-	
	Bilingual	12	34.3%
<b>Average Family Size</b>	4.2	4.2	
<b>Participants'children in High School: 16</b>	US Born	12	75%
	Foreign Born	4	25%
<b>Middle School: 19</b>	US Born	16	84%
	Foreign Born	3	16%
<b>Elementary School: 19</b>	US Born	18	95%
	Foreign Born	1	5%
Total number of children: 54	US born children	46	85.2%
	Foreign Born	8	14.8%

## 6. Findings

The Hispanic parents who participated either in the individual interviews or the focus groups identified the following as the top four barriers in raising children in the U.S.: (1) the language barrier and lack of understanding of the U.S. school system, (2) long working hours and poverty, (3) deficient bilingual services at their children's schools, and (4) unwelcoming school environment, racism and discrimination. These findings serve to highlight the participants' lived experiences and to illustrate the context for priority needs categories identified in this study.

### Theme 1: The language barrier and lack of understanding of the U.S. school system

Language issues were identified as one of the major barriers in all the interviews and the focus group sessions. The participants shared how their limited English proficiency had a negative impact on their ability to seek and access school information, to join the parent-teacher conferences, seeking for tutoring programs for their children and guiding their children for college/university preparation.

"Yes... the language has been the problem. We cannot converse with the teachers or help with our children's homework, because we don't speak English." "Schools don't provide what and how we can help our children be academically successful. They also don't prepare my kids and parents re: preparing for college, career paths and other possible opportunities. When you go to the meetings, there is no one available to help you. That's the problem."

### Theme 2: Long working hours and poverty

All participants reported that they are working class parents who work from early in the morning to late hours daily and they don't have a flexible work schedule. Thus, they have not been able to supervise their children's homework and/or attend their children's school activities. They struggle between the need to earn money for survival and finding time to support their children's educational needs.

"As a Latino immigrant, we work a lot and we don't spend enough time with our children. We don't have a work schedule 9am to 5pm or 7am to 3pm. The majority of us, we work 10 or 12 hours. And another thing we cannot leave our jobs so easily. That the hardest thing."

### Theme 3: Inadequate bilingual (English & Spanish) translator and monolingual (English only) teachers and school counsellors at their children's schools.

The common concern among the Hispanic parents were not having trained bilingual (English & Spanish) teachers or/and school counsellors and/or administrators or interpreters in the local schools. Because of English only school information, Hispanic parents either withdrew or were reluctant to attend school meetings because they did not understand the school curriculum and what/how they can support their children's education. Schools encouraged Hispanic parents to bring their own interpreters during school appointment meetings. This could be creating an issue of teacher-parent confidentiality and resulting in discouraging parents to participate in school meetings and/or activities at their children's schools.

"The problem is that I have never been able to talk with the teachers or ask questions about my children's behaviour, or how they're doing in each class. But there was no person who can translate what the meeting was about."

### Theme 4: Unwelcoming school and societal racism and discrimination

Long-time small town/community residents and school personnel, who have limited exposure to minorities such as Hispanic parents who are physically, culturally and linguistically different from the American main culture, disadvantage, discriminate and make feel unwelcome Hispanic parents at social, cultural and educational opportunities. Participating Hispanic parents expressed their experiences of unwelcoming and ethnically and racially discriminatory attitudes of school staff toward them which deter them from getting involved with their children's school meetings and activities.

"I don't have a great experience or a connected experience to the school. Because as a mother, or because of the language barrier or because I am a Hispanic mother, I haven't linked myself too much with the school. I haven't been able to connect myself with school or teacher."

## 7. Conclusion

This study reaffirms the literature in regard to identification of barriers for Hispanic parents' access to bilingual (English & Spanish) translation, interpretation and lack of bilingual teachers/school counsellors and understanding of the U.S. education system. As a result of the study's findings, a graduate school of social work faculty member from Marywood University initiated with a faith-based institution to enrol Kindergarten-High School Hispanic children & youth in a weekly individual tutoring program for reading, writing, math, and social studies and has planned and organized information sessions for immigrant Hispanic parents.

*Limitations of the Study:* The information gleaned from the qualitative data provides an in-depth view of Hispanic parents' barriers and experiences in raising children in the United States' school system. However, every city or town has their own unique needs and qualities based on the composition of their own population and the small sample size itself does not claim to be representative of the larger population.

*Recommendations:* Collaboration is integral to social work practice and education. The outcome of this study will lead to: 1) the recognition that a long-term commitment is necessary for community-university collaboration to sustain the viability of the Hispanic students' and parents' outreach program, and 2) the development of culturally diverse venues of inter-professional partnerships for social work and other diverse disciplines in the university will help sustain the Hispanic parents outreach programs in the future. Empowering immigrant Hispanic parents to build capacity ensures not only their survival, but creates sustainable growth for succeeding generations.

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