Does Latent Conflict Resulting from Deficit Thinking Among Educators Limit Latino Success in Early Childhood Programs?

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Abstract
Despite longstanding attempts to intervene in their early social and academic development, Latino students' traditionally low achievement levels have not improved over time. Many believe success has been impacted by limited preschool participation as fewer than half of eligible Latino preschoolers are enrolled and actively benefitting from available early childhood programs. This study explored commonly held reasons for limited early childhood attendance through use of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Findings suggest parents have an interest and even a willingness to involve their children in early learning programming. However, perceptions shared by educators who participated in the study may not align with this. The information presented in this article stands to shed a new light on the relationship between parents and educators including those responsible for the decisions surrounding early intervention programming. Ultimately, findings suggest school leaders and policy makers very likely need to look past old assumptions in order to establish new pathways more capable of maximizing Latino participation in early learning programs.

Keywords: early intervention, critical race theory, Latino, opportunity gap, policy

Introduction

The documented disparity between achievement results for minority students and their white counterparts is only exacerbated by the compounding effects of poverty (Carter & Welner, 2013). By the time Latino children, often in poverty, reach Kindergarten, they can be delayed anywhere between 12 and 18 months socially and academically (Carter & Welner, 2013; Hernandez, Takanishi, & Marotz, 2009). Decades worth of nation-wide intervention through early childhood programs like Head Start have consistently failed to close the early achievement gaps, often leaving the door open to "deficit thinking" patterns where blame is typically directed toward minority students and their families (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018; Walker, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Critical race theory, alternatively, finds fault with unsupported societal expectations and personally held attitudes believed to promote long-term bias towards minorities.

This article reports findings and presents implications from a study based in Arizona that had three primary focuses, each tied to the outcomes, interpretations and expectations just referenced. The first was to analyze Latino parents' beliefs and the corresponding values that influence decisions concerning whether or not to send their children to early childhood programs. Aligned with this, it also explored parent or guardian beliefs concerning the meaning and value of school readiness. Finally, it investigated parents' beliefs regarding their role in preparing their children for entrance into Kindergarten. Collectively, these areas of focus combined to provide a foundation from which to address implications for study, practice and finally policy.

Review of Literature

The literature consistently denoted children across the United States of minority and low socio-economic origins are at risk of failing to achieve at nationally targeted testing levels (Saracho, 2015; Smith & Dixon, 1995). There is such an evident gap between students coming from a low socio-economic origin and those coming from better beginnings, that the disparity has been termed the "opportunity gap" by Carter and Welner (2013). While deficit thinking proponents would potentially assign blame to a lack of parental interest and engagement, there is substantial documented evidence that poor nutrition and a lack of access to early childhood programs could well be considered among the valid reasons responsible for the noticeable delays for minority and low SES students who are showing up in Kindergarten each year (Daily, Burkhouser, & Halle, 2010).

According to Saracho (2015), early childhood programs for minorities were largely originated because of high-level investment in the cultural deficit perspective. Programs like Head Start were not only originated because of deficit thinking, but were also designed, implemented and continue to be operated according to the same mindset which has always stressed "fixing" family structures, not just educating children in classrooms.

Proponents of the deficit paradigm often suggest that low enrollments for minority children serve as proof that the problem truly rests with the values and priorities of minority cultures. While they may cite statistics including the lowest percentage of attendance (27%) at early childhood centers (USDoE Institute of Education Science, 2014) as their proof, others (High, LaGasse, Becker, Ahlgren, & Gardner, 2000; USDoE Institute of Education Science, 2014) represent the low turnout as evidence of other problems like limited access or design flaws in the program as well as recruitment and operational approaches.

Blame is frequently assigned to cultural values according to Yosso (2005) and practices that are different from the mainstream segments of society. The tendency to debate the most important "cause" often limits and at times even effectively puts an end to constructive dialogue instead of moving forward and creating more comprehensive policy addressing what can be done to improve learning conditions for students who are at risk. There is a tremendous amount at stake with this issue. Knowledge is the capital that drives success in most societies, and America is no exception (Engle and Black, 2008). According to Yosso (2005) there are those who are politically motivated to sound sympathetic, all the while implying enough has already been done.

According to Durand (2011) as well as Hatcher, Nuner and Paulsel (2012), parents are not the obstacle they are portrayed to be by deficit thinking proponents, and they do in fact value readiness skills. Ultimately, it is important to define readiness in a more equitable manner (Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012), wherein the focus is limited less by perceptions concerning cultural limitations and instead strives to foster more agreement concerning the importance of gaining the needed pre-literacy skills found to be so vital for success in Kindergarten. Slutzky with DeBruin-Parecki (2019) noted through their extensive investigation into the topic that there is little agreement concerning a definition for readines. Further, they conveyed that the intense national emphasis being placed on standards and accountability has swung the definition back towards primarily an academics-oriented position in places like Texas. For purposes of this study and this article, readiness has been conceptualized more holisitcally to not only emphasize measured acadmic development, but to also include social, emotional, and physical development as equally important and less discriminatory components of a well-balanced readiness model.

Focus of Study

Emphasizing investment in future success ahead of perpetuating blame, it is of vital importance to better understand the underlying dynamics responsible for the disconnect between minority students and government funded early childhood programs. The study referenced in this article analyzed factors including beliefs, values and knowledge of Latino families in comparison to perceptions of the educators serving them. More specifically it also addressed the role of mothers and the relationships between families and schools. Ultimately, the study focused on parental attitudes towards early childhood programs, their beliefs concerning school readiness in general, and finally their perceptions concerning their role in preparing their children for the increasing demands of Kindergarten.

Research Methods

A mixed case study approach was utilized in the study as it provided a complimentary approach for understanding complex social phenomenon (Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2007 and Yin, 2014). The survey instrument was developed by way of a multi-step process following extensive review of the relevant literature. The researcher consulted with several practicing colleagues in the field of education during survey construction. Two professors from the university provided critiques to assist in refinement of the first draft. Subsequent feedback was provided by three suggested experts in the field, and after modifications were made, the instrument was pilot tested with a small population outside of the sample and modified a final time with assistance from the expert panel already described to achieve the final protocol.

Purposeful sampling was utilized to maximize access to both representative parents within the overall school population, as well as expert educators available through the cooperating school district. The population for this study came from an urban Arizona school district serving students with a low socioeconomic background and high levels of minority students and families. In all 132 of a contacted 586 parents responded to a 30 question Likert-scale survey instrument, and 5 voluntarily completed the follow-up interview. Out of a possible 99 school employees who were contacted for survey, 24 responded. Microsoft Excel was utilized for analysis of descriptive quantitative data as hypothesis testing was not completed for this study. While transcription and analysis were completed for all survey responses. Findings will be described next and will be presented according to their connection to the original research questions.

Findings

(RQ 1) What are Latino parents' cultural beliefs regarding the meaning of Kindergarten readiness?

Educators (both teachers and administrators) who completed the survey did not give Latino parents credit for being aware of services available to them and their children. Along with having awareness of program availability, parents were aware that standards and expectations for children appeared to have changed as compared to what was in place with earlier generations. Whereas letter recognition and counting were sufficient in the past, there was strong parental awareness that this was no longer the case. It was also realized that social adjustment was important. Table 1 shows the actual responses of Latino parents as they were addressing readiness expectations. Table 2 shows teacher responses. In all the results indicate strong support for important benchmarks. Also, as shown with statement 2.5, parents did not demonstrate any proclivity towards keeping children home because they were young. Once again, administrators scored considerably lower (61.6% to 90%) when rating Latino parents' understanding and acceptance that it is important for their children to be ready for Kindergarten. Finally, and understandably, numerous parents indicated it was important for the child to know English ahead of entering school.

Table 1
Parents' Views on Readiness by Percent

Parents' Statements	SA	A	AMD	DMA	D	SD	SKIP
2.1. It's important for my child to be able to express his/her needs.	78.8	17.4	.8				3.0
2.2. It's important that my child learns to respect authority.	82.6	12.9	.8				
2.3. It's important that my child values and respect our family.	76.5	16.7	3.0		.8		3.0
2.4. It's important that my child learns moral values and good manners, and behaves appropriately.	78.8	17.4	.8				3.0
2.5. He/ she is still too young to go to preschool.	6.8	4.5	8.3	9.8	39.4	20.5	10.6

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, AMD = Agree more than Disagree, DMA = Disagree more than Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

Table 2
Teachers' Views on Readiness by Percent

Parents' Statements	SA	A	AMD	DMA	D	SD	SKIP
2.1. Latino parents believe that it's important for their child to be able to express his/her needs.	30.8	38.5	23.1		7.7		
2.2. Latino parents believe that it's important that their child learns to respect authority.	30.8	30.8	30.8		7.7		
2.3. Latino parents believe that it's important that their child values and respects his/her family.	46.2	46.2	7.7				
2.4. Latino parents believe that it's important that their child learns moral values and good manners, and behaves appropriately.	23.1	30.8	38.5	7.7			
2.5. Latino parents believe their children are still too young to go to preschool.	7.7	15.4	38.5	30.8	7.7		

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, AMD = Agree more than Disagree, DMA = Disagree more than Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

(RQ 2) What are the reasons leading Latino parents and guardians to enroll their children in an early childhood program?

As was also demonstrated in RQ 1, educators again underestimated parent awareness of and commitment to early education. Only 15% of administrators agreed or strongly agreed that parents possessed sufficient information about programming options, whereas 56% of responding parents agreed or strongly agreed concerning their awareness. Teachers came in more toward the middle between both other groups. As the Table 3 shows, parents were aware of and supportive of programs and options for their children. This was further supported by interview response. Additional interview feedback indicated that separation of a child from their mother is a very real issue. Still, along with exposing children to English, there was expressed awareness that the change in daily routine and development of a relationship at school was to be viewed as a positive for the child. In all, parents had an "improvement" outlook once again, whereas educators (Table 4) tended to continue to uphold a more negative and perhaps outdated outlook suggesting parents were lacking in awareness or values as has been portrayed by earlier research.

Table 3
Parents' Views on Enrollment by Percent

Parents' Statements	SA	A	AMD	DMA	D	SD	SKIP
3.1. I found plenty of information regarding preschool programs available within the district, which facilitated my decision.	32.6	23.5	8.3	3.8	1.5	.8	29.5
3.2. I was confident that the preschool program is good and would prepare my child for kindergarten.	48.5	18.9	3.0	1.5			28.0
3.3. I wanted my child to be well prepared for kindergarten and beyond.	59.8	10.6	2.3				27.3
3.4. I had sufficient information on the importance of preschool programs, which made the decision to send my child to a preschool program the easier to make.	38.6	25.0	5.3	1.5	.8	.8	28.0

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, AMD = Agree more than Disagree, DMA = Disagree more than Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

Table 4
Teachers' Views on Enrollment by Percent

Parents' Statements	SA	A	AMD	DMA	D	SD	SKIP
3.1. There is plenty of information regarding preschool programs available within the district, which facilitated their decision.		38.5	7.7	30.8	23.1		
3.2. Parents have confidence regarding the ECP's success.	7.7	30.8	30.8	15.4	15.4		
3.3. Parents want to ensure their children are more prepared to school.	7.7	53.8	30.8				
3.4. Parents have sufficient educational background to make the decision to send their children to ECP such as information about the importance of preschool programs.		46.2	23.1	23.1	7.7		

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, AMD = Agree more than Disagree, DMA = Disagree more than Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

(RQ 3) What are the reasons Latino parents choose not to enroll their children in an early childhood program (ECP)?

If parents sent their children to programs, they were directed to opt out of this line of questioning for RQ 3. This means some care needs to be exercised in viewing the results because they represent a smaller and very specific sub sample. As can be seen in Table 5, there really were no visible trends to report. Parents had individual reasons for individual decisions that were based more so on specific needs at a given time with a given child as opposed to pursuing general inclinations, attitudes or cultural values. Administrators and teachers (Table 6) did reveal a trend, however, as 62% and 61% respectively responded in a way that reinforced their being of a belief that lack of parent information was the primary reason children did not attend early childhood programming when it was available to them. Further, more than half of the administrators concluded that parents were resistant toward programs because of their immigration status when parents themselves did not report this. Clearly as shown in Table 3 and parent statement 4.6 this is nowhere near the case in actuality.

It should be noted that whereas a subset of parents who "did not" send at least one of their children responded to RQ 3, all educators responded. Parents responded based on decisions and their own actual reasons for those decisions. Educators lacking that information instead based their responses on perceptions and attitudes along with values that each question and ensuing response seems to suggest are reflective of their overall impressions and widely held attitudes toward Latino parents and their motivations. In contrast, those parents who did respond to RQ 3 because of at least some level of opt out with at least one child, did indicate changed awareness over time (conditions were no longer how they had originally remembered them before) as opposed to the educators whos' perceptions viewpoints appeared to remain unchanged.

Table 5

Parents' Struggles with Enrollment by Percent

Parents' Statements	SA	A	AMD	DMA	D	SD	SKIP
4.1. I didn't find enough information regarding preschool programs available within the district, and for that reason, I didn't enroll my child in a program.	8.3	7.6	6.8	5.3	9.1	3.8	59.1
4.2. I was not confident about the program's success in preparing my child for kindergarten.	7.6	3.8	3.8	2.3	15.2	12.1	55.3
4.3. The programs available required too much parent involvement (such as long interviews) or a lot of documentation, etc).	7.6	8.3	6.1	6.8	10.6	6.1	54.5
4.4. I do not think that preschool programs are	4.5	2.3	3.8	6.1	16.7	11.4	55.3

important for children to be prepared, and I chose to let my child to stay with me at home.							
4.5. I didn't have enough information about the programs and how to have access to them.	8.3	8.3	6.1	4.5	9.1	8.3	55.3
4.6. Sometimes we're afraid of receiving government assistance because of our immigration status.	9.8	6.1	5.3	2.3	9.1	12.9	54.5
4.7. My child is too young to go to school.	3.0	2.3	3.8	3.8	21.2	9.8	56.1

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, AMD = Agree more than Disagree, DMA = Disagree more than Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

Table 6

Teachers' Struggles with Enrollment by Percent

Parents' Statements	SA	A	AMD	DMA	D	SD	SKIP
4.1. Lack of information regarding ECP's	30.8	30.8	23.1	15.4			
4.2. Lack of confidence on the program's success.	7.7		23.1	46.2	15.4	7.7	
4.3. Parents think that enrolling their children in an ECP requires too much parent involvement (such as long interviews) or a lot of documentation, etc).	7.7	15.4	23.1	38.5	15.4		
4.4. Parents think that preschool programs are not important for the children to be prepared and chose to keep them at home.		30.8	38.5	15.4	7.7	7.7	
4.5. Parents lack the necessary information to navigate the system.	7.7	38.5	38.5	7.7		7.7	
4.6. Families fear approaching government assistance because of their immigration status.	23.1	38.5	23.1	15.4			

4.7. Parents think their child is too young to go to school.		38.5	38.5	23.1	
4.8. Families have application barriers due to limited English proficiency or difficulty documenting income.	23.1	23.1	23.1	30.8	

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, AMD = Agree more than Disagree, DMA = Disagree more than Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

(RQ 4) What do Latino parents believe are their main responsibilities in preparing their children for Kindergarten?

Overall, in the responses they provided parents (Table 7) indicated a supportive position toward early learning and toward childhood programming. In statement 5.6 only 26% indicated a belief that they could prepare their child better at home than they could expect others to do. Tied to earlier information, some parents did indicate having the means to do this, whereas those who lacked the means (expressed in earlier questions) voiced a preference for learning to occur at school. Administrators again tended to underestimate the viewpoints of parents, but in a less negative sense than proved to be the case with other questions. In fact most disagreed (69%) with the proposition that Latino parents preferred to prepare their children for Kindergarten at home, where as teachers (Table 8) responded in a more neutral manner.

Only one parent indicated it was her job to teach academic skills to her child. Though several indicated that school was a better place and better equipped for teaching academic and social skills.

Table 7

Parents' Preschool Priorities by Percent

Parents' Statements	SA	A	AMD	DMA	D	SD	SKIP
5.1. It's important for my child to have social emotional skills, such as expressing his/her feelings, problem solving, waiting for his/her turn, etc.	59.8	27.3	2.3	.8	.8	1.5	7.6
5.2. It's important for my child to have early reading skills, such as vocabulary, letter recognition, letter association, etc.	65.2	21.2	4.5	1.5			7.6
5.3. It's important for my child to learn early math skills, such as counting,	61.4	23.5	5.3	1.5	1.5		6.8

patterns, shapes and measurements.							
5.4. It's important for my child to develop fine and gross motor skills.	63.6	21.2	5.3	2.3		.8	6.8
5.5. I think my child will learn all of the above in kindergarten.	47.7	19.7	8.3	5.3	9.8	2.3	6.8
5.6. I can prepare my child better for kindergarten at home.	16.7	9.1	13.6	19.7	19.7	14.4	6.8

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, AMD = Agree more than Disagree, DMA = Disagree more than Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

Table 8

Teachers' Preschool Priorities by Percent

Parents' Statements	SA	A	AMD	DMA	D	SD	SKIP
5.1. Teaching social emotional skills, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, recognition and expression of their feelings, social interactions and respect.	15.4	15.4	15.4	46.2	7.7		
5.2. Teaching language and early literacy skills, such as vocabulary, letter recognition, letter association and early writing.	7.7	15.4	30.8	15.4	23.1	7.7	
5.3. Teaching math skills, such as counting, patterns, shapes and measurements.	15.4	7.7	30.8	15.4	23.1	7.7	
5.4. Teaching fine and gross motor skills.	7.7	15.4	30.8	15.4	23.1	7.7	
5.5. They think their children will learn all of the above in kindergarten.	23.1	46.1	15.4	15.4			
5.6. They prefer to prepare their children for kindergarten at home.		7.7	30.8	38.5	15.4	7.7	

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, AMD = Agree more than Disagree, DMA = Disagree more than Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

Discussion

A recent report published by First Things Arizona (2016) indicates that the state's youth are more likely to be born into poverty than peers found anywhere else across the United States. According to the same source, the youth across Arizona are also less likely to attend preschool than comparable groups across America. This is a problem that educators in Arizona are very familiar with, and have grappled with for a long time. Ultimately, understanding of the long-held challenges they face may help explain the reported perceptions of educators who participated in this study.

Results from the surveys and interviews only represent a small slice of Arizona thinking, but appear to confirm some enduring stereotypes, while honestly crushing others. Latino parents regularly rated and voiced support for early childhood programs. They recognized changes in standards and readiness expectations, and gave consistent indication that they were able to come to terms with those changes. They acknowledged their own cultural dispositions and consistently committed to responses which were supportive of the interventions that were intended and developed for their children. They saw the needs and the benefits that were present.

In contrast to parents, responses from the educators who completed the survey were consistent with the mindset of the deficit thinking paradigm in that they consistently rated Latino parents as resistant, uninformed and therein the cause of the problem. In as much as parents did not report overt tensions, there is reason to wonder where the educator perceptions are coming from. Are they personally held positions, or do they result from repeated exposure to information provided from reports documenting the dire conditions in Arizona? While this study exposed this question, it will take further investigation to definitively determine what the true educator motivations were.

Conclusions

In light of these findings one really has to wonder how much parents potentially feel the effects of bias that is potentially held by some of the very people they depend on to provide their children's education. And, as result of these feelings, how much does diminished trust lead to limited school engagement and stunted future success. Yosso (2005) indicated that such bias is highly discriminatory and indicative of the thinly disguised racism that plagues society. There is no indication that parents are aware of the perceptions of the professional educational staff, which is probably a good thing. Still, according to Zamudio, Russell, Rios and Bridgeman (2011), bias is felt whether it is expressed or not, and it often makes minority parents feel unwelcomed.

Perhaps differences are not as drastic as numbers obtained through this study would suggest. There was indication that parents may have only recently modified their thinking and their perceptions to be in line with new standards and new expectations. Their attitude as expressed in this study is significant, but could also represent very recent change that evolves slowly and quietly. It is possible that the viewpoints of the educators revealed through this study represent outdated understandings as much as they represent heartfelt and intended bias. In any case, whatever the real reasons may be, implications of the study are significant and are addressed next.

Implications for Future Research

Research that more broadly examined the outcomes from this study across all of Arizona and other parts of the United States would be important high stakes scholarship. The literature acknowledges critical race theory, but only to a lesser extent considers its impact on poor early childhood program attendance rates. It is reasonable to expect diminished engagement and limited success to be logical results of prolonged distrust of schools and their leaders. There is need to look into this perspective further. It would be beneficial to compare perceptions of these parents to those of non-minority parents to potentially better understand if there is also evidence of potential bias toward the students and families early childhood programs are expected to serve.

Implications for Practice

School leaders need to be made aware of findings reported here. They need to work hard to avoid viewing the information presented here as condemnation and instead treat it as a powerful wakeup call. They need to work with the perhaps "newer" attitudes expressed by parents in this study and abandon old dead-end approaches in favor of building new understandings and new working arrangements with the stakeholders they serve.

Implications for Policy

To add to the challenges unveiled by this study, programs like Head Start, though well intended, have some of the most minimally credentialed, minimally supported, and minimally compensated employees conceivable. There is tremendous disservice at a national policy level in consistently providing the documented neediest students across the nation with the least qualified resources available. To then find fault with their parents' cultural leanings, and consistently offer this as the root cause for their ongoing lack of success is truly demeaning and representative of societal prejudice that too easily goes unchallenged in America.

Even with a small sample size and the clear need to replicate this study, the potential policy implications at local, state and federal levels are staggering. At best there is need to update the thinking of service providers and leadership to be more in line with the more progressive attitudes expressed by parents in this study. At worst the findings presented here affirm the underpinnings of critical race theory and identify tremendous need to reexamine the overall thinking and the leadership approaches linked with programs for minority and low SES student populations.

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