

## Experiences of Latino children attending rural elementary schools in the Southeastern U.S.: perspectives from Latino parents in burgeoning Latino communities.

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### **Abstract:**

A qualitative study, using focus groups of Latino parents living in a rural Southeastern U.S. community, was conducted to explore the experiences of elementary-school-aged Latino children. Using the consensual qualitative research method to analyze participants' responses, this study identified four general themes that impact Latino children in these communities: (a) school/teacher characteristics and resources, (b) academic experiences in U.S. schools, (c) family and cultural traits, and (d) personal/social/economic factors. Implications for school counselors are detailed.

### **Article:**

Between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population grew by at least 250% in many Southeastern states (Hamann, Wortham, & Murillo, 2002; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Specifically, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee all experienced increases over 300% in their Latino population in the past 15 years (Pew Hispanic Center, 2005). Unlike past Latino residents who temporarily lived in these states mostly as migrant or seasonal laborers, Latinos are now settling more permanently (Pew Hispanic Center). What makes this Latino diaspora (Hamann et al.) increasingly unique is that these individuals are electing to move to and settle in rural communities within these Southeastern states.

Educators (including school counselors) working in Southeastern schools in rural settings have been caught off guard by the influx of Latino children and adolescents into their schools (Wortham & Contreras, 2002). Where once rural educators served significant numbers of White and African American students, there now are growing numbers of Latino children. According to Wortham and Contreras, school personnel working in the rural Latino diaspora have been ill-equipped to address barriers to academic and personal/social development of Latino children, including English-as-a-second-language needs, immigration status concerns, and working with parents who do not speak English.

A study was conducted using parent interviews to examine the academic and personal/social experiences of Latino elementary school children in Southeastern U.S. rural schools located in burgeoning Latino communities. The decision to ask parents for their perspectives was based on the personal knowledge most parents have of their young children's school experiences and the interest most Latino parents have regarding their children's education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002; Valdez, 1996).

### **METHOD**

The study was conducted with Latino parents from a Southeastern U.S. state that experienced a Latino population increase greater than 400% between 1990 and 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Nine Latino parents (3 males and 6 females) living in a rural, burgeoning Latino community elected to participate in this study. All participants worked in the local agricultural or service industry sector and all currently had children attending local elementary schools. Participants had all lived in urban settings (e.g., Los Angeles, Washington, DC, Dallas) prior to moving to this rural community. Parents in this study had been in the United States for at least 2

years but no more than 32 ( $M = 14.7$  years). Participants were divided into two focus groups. One group was composed of three married couples. The second group included three married women, who elected to attend the group without their husbands. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes, was audio recorded, and was conducted in Spanish by the first author.

Both recordings were first translated into English and transcribed for data analysis. Focus group transcripts were analyzed using consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The chief goal of CQR is to establish consensus in data sets (i.e., focus group transcripts) by determining common themes. Consensus using CQR is achieved by having multiple researchers develop common themes from the data, followed by describing the general domains represented in each theme.

A focus group moderator's guide, developed prior to data collection (Morgan, 1997), contained open-ended questions and was written in Spanish. The English version of the moderator's guide contained the following questions: (a) What are the school needs of your children and other Latino children in local elementary schools? (b) What kinds of resources and activities are offered to your children in local elementary schools? (c) How effective would you say these resources and activities have been? (d) What are some of the differences between Latino children in this community and their non-Latino peers? (e) What kinds of differences exist between Latino children living in this rural community and Latino children living in cities? (f) What kinds of differences exist between Latino children whose parents are migrant/seasonal workers and the majority of those living in this community, who are permanently settled?

## **RESULTS**

Latino parents in this study provided 159 different responses to the questions in the moderator's guide. Participants' responses were used to specify and define 32 domains, organized into four general themes. There is some overlap among domains and across general themes. The four general themes and associated definitions (see Table 1) are related to Latino children living in burgeoning Latino communities.

### **Domains for General Theme 1: School and Teachers as Resources and Obstacles**

The following domains correspond to General Theme 1: (a) Collaboration between parents and teachers--past collaborative experiences with children's teachers were helpful. (b) Counseling services--the assistance of school counselors was beneficial to Latino children. (c) Encouragement--encouragement and motivation from teachers were beneficial for children. (d) Special programs--these included beneficial and effective school-based interventions such as after-school programs, preschool education, tutors, community mentors, and counselor-led study skills groups. (e) Good teachers/bad teachers--"good" teachers (i.e., patient, willing to talk with parents, respectful of language differences) and "bad" teachers (i.e., impatient, unwilling to talk with parents, intolerant of language differences) had strong influences on children. (f) Extracurricular activities--sports, school clubs, and field trips all provided children with positive impressions of school. (g) Language barriers--efforts to translate important documents and policies into Spanish and providing translation services were a critical support. (h) Disrespect of children--this category encompassed a wide range of disrespectful acts on the part of teachers, such as not respecting children's cultural heritage. (i) Willingness to help Latino families--examples included providing school supplies, empathy, and compassion to the local Latino community.

### **Domains for General Theme 2: School Policies Negatively Impacting the Academic Success of Latino Children**

The following domains correspond to General Theme 2: (a) Stress--high levels of pressure were on young children to succeed on state-wide tests and on competition in the classroom. (b) Transition problems--participants who had children in middle school reported their children encountered transition problems between elementary school and middle school. (c) Inappropriate educational development--U.S. schools represented institutions that did not let "children be children / que los niños sean niños," where educational development was not allowed to occur at a normal pace. (d) Grade retention--the U.S. school system unfairly penalized Latino children (specifically those with limited English proficiency) through high grade-retention rates. (e)

Formal vs. informal schooling--the formal nature of their local schools, a sense of "coldness / frialdad," was very different from the informal nature of schools in their native lands.

**Domains for General Theme 3: Family and Cultural Characteristics of Latino Children Living in Burgeoning Latino Communities**

The following domains correspond to General Theme 3: (a) Discipline--Latino children were expected to be well-behaved and demonstrate discipline at school and with adults. (b) Future careers/hope for the future--one of the main reasons participants opted to leave their homelands for the United States was the educational opportunities offered to their children. (c) Role models/"ejemplos"--positive Latino role models in rural burgeoning Latino communities were lacking. (d) Glad to be in the United States--participants were grateful for the opportunities offered to them and their children. (e) Too much freedom for children is detrimental--American culture affords local non-Latino children too much freedom. (f) Formality leads to community barriers--the difference between the Latino culture (which they considered informal) and the local American culture (which they considered more formal) has strained relations among community leaders, businesses, organizations, and the burgeoning Latino community. (g) Importance of values/"valores"--family values and good manners are desirable characteristics in Latino children. (h) Cultural activities are important--children's schools had cultural activities acknowledging the influence of the Latino community, which were not reciprocated by the local community. (i) Parental sacrifice for children's benefit--bad Latino parents are those who do not sacrifice their time, energy, and money so that their children can succeed in their new surrounding. (j) Parental involvement--participants wanted to partake in children's schools at a similar rate to non-Latino parents.

**Domains for General Theme 4: Social Factors Impacting the Development of Latino Children Living in Rural Communities**

Table 1. Four General Themes of Study and Their Definitions

General Theme	Definition
1. School and Teachers as Resources and Obstacles	Latino parents believed that the resources offered by their children’s school and teachers, in addition, to the characteristics of their teachers, facilitated or obstructed the academic and personal/social development of their children.
2. School Policies Negatively Impacting the Academic Success Of Latino Children	Latino parents expressed practices in the U.S. educational system that may have a detrimental impact on their children’s academic success.
3. Family and Cultural Characteristics Of Latino Children Living in Burgeoning	Latino parents shared several attributes of the Latino culture and Latino families that relate to attending schools in rural Communities and living in burgeoning Latino communities.
4. Social Factors Impacting the Development of Latino Children Living in Rural Communities	Latino parents detailed several social and economic characteristics (and differences) between rural and urban Latinos as well as Migrant and permanent-resident Latinos, which may affect the development of Latino children.

The following domains correspond to General Theme 4: (a) Permanent residence leads to strong Latino community--a nonmigrant, nontransitory Latino community is important for helping Latino children achieve healthy development. (b) Big cities influence rural communities--the small yet constant influx of Latinos from urban areas to their rural community is harmful to children, and parents worried about "big city" ideas and activities that could negatively influence their children, in addition to increased hostility from non-Latino community members in the area. (c) Gang activity--there has been an increase in gang-related behavior (i.e., gang-related graffiti and gang colors) at the local middle and high school levels. (d) Substance abuse and trafficking--there was concern over recent increases in drug trafficking and driving-under-the-influence arrests in the area. (e) Beware of the streets--the lack of community resources and activities has led children to "hang out" in the streets with nothing to do. (f) Technology--computers and television programs provided children with access to the outside world, though parents worried that too much technology would lead children to disconnect from family and community responsibilities. (g) Parental frustration--this was due to a lack of local community resources, respect, and understanding, when compared to a perceived abundance of social services offered to Latinos in urban areas and to migrant/seasonal workers.

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on parents' accounts, teachers and schools willing to work within the Latino community are considered allies and contributors to the success of Latino children. It seems that extracurricular activities organized by schools and efforts to make schools a more inviting place by hiring bilingual staff contribute to the educational experience of Latino children. Teachers working in rural, burgeoning Latino communities report the usefulness of these types of activities (e.g., Martinez & Martinez, 2002; Wortham & Contreras, 2002). Broad-based educational obstacles for young Latino children, such as problems associated with high stress and developmentally inappropriate academic expectations, are more overarching and widespread and negatively impact the scholastic experiences of Latino children. In addition, the experiences of Latino children throughout the Latino diaspora are affected by the interaction of Latino cultural traits and the local, non-Latino, rural community.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

The ASCA National Model[R] (American School Counselor Association, 2005) calls on school counselors to facilitate the academic, career, and personal/ social development of all children. The foundation of a school counseling program in a rural, burgeoning Latino school should include in its guiding principles the willingness to make concerted efforts to address specific concerns and strengths of the school's Latino stakeholders. Also, when considering the obstacles and resources that Latino students and parents are presented with, school counselors could augment their delivery system in a variety of ways, such as conducting classroom guidance on tolerance with the help of Latino students and parents, or implementing psychoeducational groups for newly enrolled English-language-learner students (Villalba, 2003).

School counselors in these types of schools also can use disaggregated state-standardized testing data to determine specific academic strengths and weaknesses for these children. Also, school counselors with an active counseling advisory council could request feedback from the council on methods to better serve the Latino student body, in addition to recruiting Latino parents and community members to serve on the council.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative studies have inherent limitations related to generalization (Krueger, 1998). Therefore, researchers acknowledge the difficulty in applying these findings to all Latino parents and children in rural, burgeoning Latino communities. Also, the focus groups were conducted in Spanish, by a Latino researcher, which may have contributed to the amount of information shared by the participants. Additionally, researchers sought the input of parents for determining the needs of Latino children instead of asking children about their own educational experiences. Finally, the actual number of students being discussed could have been larger if 6 of the 9 participants had not been married to each other.

### **Conclusion**

Latino children attending elementary schools in rural communities with a stable, burgeoning Latino community are confronted with a variety of positive and negative experiences. The results from this study provide a scope of issues and concerns from the people who know these children the best--their parents. School counselors working in rural settings with a large Latino population should consider the results from this study when addressing the needs and strengths of Latino students, parents, and community members. Specifically, engaging in an egalitarian dialogue with Latino parents and children could help pinpoint educational obstacles and related interventions, which may contribute to the success of an entire community.

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