Parenting With Latino Families During Kindergarten Transition
Lessons Learned From a Parent-Teacher Conference

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Parent-educator partnerships are an important element of effective early childhood, K-12, and special education programs (Dunst, Trivette, & Snyder, 2000; Tabor, 2008). While early childhood and other classrooms in the United States are increasingly diverse, the teachers in those classrooms are unlikely to be of the same linguistic or cultural background as their students (Gay & Howard, 2000; Sahuja, Early, & Clifford, 2002). Although teachers may have the best intentions regarding their interactions with children and families, it can be challenging to partner effectively with families that come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Harry, 2008; Saffold & Longwell-Grice, 2008). A partnership can be defined as “a relationship in which families...and professionals agree to build on each others’ expertise and resources, as appropriate, for the purpose of making and implementing decisions that will directly benefit students and indirectly benefit other family members and professionals” (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, SooDak, & Shogren, 2010, p. 137). To pursue effective partnerships in early education, we need to develop a better understanding of the ways in which interactions and language use with immigrant families can help fulfill teachers’ good intentions.

This article takes a culturally and linguistically responsive perspective regarding parent-educator partnerships. First, we briefly discuss selected factors that can affect partnerships with Latino families (e.g., language, culture, and power). Next, we present a case study of an early childhood parent-teacher conference in which challenges to partnerships are highlighted during a discussion of the child’s subsequent-year, kindergarten placement. Conference transcripts provide critical details that can lead to recommendations for early educators to develop partnerships with immigrant Latino parents and recognize Latino parents’ advocacy on behalf of their children.

Importance of Culture, Language, and Power
Educators and immigrant families may face many challenges establishing and maintaining partnerships due to, among other considerations, cultural differences, language use, and parent-teacher power differentials. First, cultural differences regarding teacher and parent roles, the goals of education, interaction styles, presumptions, and behavioral expectations during interactions can lead to misunderstandings (Cheatham & Santos, 2011; Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raiff, 2000; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010). For example, research indicates that while Latino parents typically value the development of socio-emotional competence (Okagaki & Frensch, 1998), they may see the school’s primary responsibility as developing a child’s academic competencies (Váldez, 1996). Moreover, Latino families tend to place a high value on family relationships, such as an emphasis on having siblings take care of and play with each other (Farver & Howes, 1993), more so than families from mainstream cultures. The concept of familism is a core value of the Mexican culture (Baca Zinn, 1982) that promotes family solidarity and commitment to family members (Espinosa, 2006; Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, & Marin, 1987).
In addition, the need for parental advocacy on behalf of their children can contradict many parents' expectations (e.g., Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Tellier-Robinson, 2000). Some parents may believe they do not have the experience and knowledge necessary to partner as equals with educators; and many are not genuinely encouraged to do so.

Second, language use can impact partnerships with immigrant Latino families and may result in communication and collaboration difficulties. Some parents would rather communicate in English, despite having a low level of English proficiency even when language interpreters are available (Jimenez-Silva, 2009). For some of these parents, understanding educators' natural uses of the English language (e.g., everyday word and sentence usage) can be difficult (Cheatham & Ro, 2011). For example, parents may not fully understand the intended meaning(s) and significance of terms and phrases used in early education, such as when an educator talks about children's "social emotional skills." Similarly, parents may not easily comprehend intended pragmatic aspects of teachers' language use (i.e., what speakers assume and leave unsaid), which can be highly influenced by culture. For instance, many early childhood parent-teacher conferences include child goal-setting, in which parents may be unprepared to participate as expected by teachers. Likewise, teachers may not understand the pragmatic meanings of parents' subtle advocacy attempts on behalf of their children, nor understand parents' resistance to teachers' suggestions.

Third, because educators typically have significantly greater power during interactions with parents, partnerships can be placed at risk (Milner, 2006). Educators often take an expert role, placing parents in the role of a recipient of the educator's decisions rather than a partner with the educator (Turnbull et al., 2010). This may be especially true during interactions with parents from cultures in which teachers are highly respected; thus, parents' disagreements and advocacy for their children may be very subtle, and perhaps more difficult for educators to identify. Moreover, immigrant parents may need full explanations of program options, procedures, and requirements (Jimenez-Silva, 2011). For example, when discussing kindergarten transition and applicable procedures, teachers may need to provide more explanation. Additionally, within partnerships among equals, parents and teachers can disagree and, notably, parents can be correct as they pursue good intentions regarding their children.

Thus, partnerships with Latino immigrant families often require early educators' attention to cultural differences, language use, and power. Importantly, parent-teacher interactions can be improved when educators tap research-based and best practice recommendations.

Kindergarten Transition
Transition to kindergarten can be challenging for families, children, and educators. Typically conceived as dependent on an individual child's skills, transition can be broadened to include families, schools, and communities collaboratively ensuring children's success in kindergarten (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). From this perspective, transition is considered a process by which children are prepared for and supported in kindergarten (Rosenkoetter et al., 2009).

Planning is key to a successful transition. Families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may approach transitions in ways educators do not expect (Doucet & Tudge, 2007). Educators viewing transitions as an opportunity for programs and schools to prepare for children (rather than vice versa) holds promise for supporting children's kindergarten success, particularly for children from diverse backgrounds. A full discussion of kindergarten transitioning is beyond the scope of this article; interested readers are encouraged to review Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) for more on this perspective. Nonetheless, the fact that kindergarten transition requires ongoing planning is reflected in our subsequent discussion.

The Case
To highlight the challenges and some strategies to overcome the difficulties as early educators partner with Latino immigrant families, we present a case study illustrating potential for partnerships. By focusing on detailed description, educators can identify and apply "lessons learned" from the case to their educational settings. The following real-life case is based on an interview with an early childhood teacher and an analysis of an audio-recorded, early childhood parent-teacher conference. During the conference, a child's future educational placement was discussed and disputed, with the placement decision ultimately made by the teacher. Within the case, partnership challenges due to cultural differences, language use, and parent-teacher power differences are illustrated.

The Setting
We focus on one Latino parent, "Luisa," an
immigrant from Mexico and the mother of a U.S.-born child, "Teresa." The early childhood teacher, "Jean," and a teaching assistant were European American and only spoke English. Teresa was a typically developing, 4-year-old girl whose family was from a low-income background. Teresa had many strengths and had not been labeled as having—not was suspected of having—a disability. She was considered bilingual, although she was increasingly speaking English at the expense of Spanish at home. This parent-teacher conference was held during spring at an early childhood center; the purpose of the parent-teacher conference included partnering with families in the education of their children. At the request of the mother, the parent-teacher conference was conducted in English.

The Teacher's Perspective
During an interview, Jean expressed good intentions regarding the education of all children. She spoke highly about the children in her early childhood program and their families. She wanted to build parents' confidence to support and participate in their children's education. However, Jean had a somewhat limited view of parent involvement, and expressed that parents should allow more time for her to talk during parent-teacher conferences. Moreover, Jean implied that she was the expert regarding children, due to her knowledge of child development and early education. She also suggested that Latino families viewed her as "maestra," which, she stated, translated as "master of teaching" (typically, this term is interpreted as "teacher" in English).

Parent-Teacher Conference Talk
A word count indicated that during the parent-teacher conference, Jean and her teaching assistant spoke over 80 percent of the words. Therefore, partnership difficulties between Jean and Luisa were evident throughout the conference. An ongoing discussion regarding Teresa's future educational placement showed that Luisa entered the conference assuming that her daughter was ready for kindergarten. By portraying Teresa almost solely in a positive light, the teacher encouraged Luisa's belief that her daughter was ready for kindergarten despite stating that Teresa would spend another school year in the early childhood program.

When Luisa challenged the teacher's recommendation that her child remain in the early childhood program, the teacher responded primarily with vague explanations. Luisa subtly, yet persistently, tried to sway Jean from her recommendation not to move Teresa to kindergarten, to no avail. The conference ended with no further talk about kindergarten for Teresa. Thus, Jean denied Luisa's attempts to participate in the decision about her daughter's future educational program.

The next section reviews relevant parent-teacher conference segments: 1) teacher statement of child placement and functioning, 2) the mother's first advocacy attempt, 3) the mother's second advocacy attempt, and 4) the mother's final advocacy attempt. Conference excerpts are accompanied by descriptions and followed by a discussion of ways in which Jean could have accounted for cultural differences, language use, and differences in parent-teacher power to more effectively partner with Luisa regarding her daughter's educational program.

The Teacher's Statement of Child Placement and Functioning: Jean began the conference by greeting and engaging Luisa in friendly small talk. Next, Jean briefly reported on how Teresa was performing at school, socio-emotionally and academically, and followed by stating that Teresa would continue at the early education center for the next school year. Jean then added, "Teresa is self-directed and independent and she's doing really well."

Jean continued the conference with positive comments about Teresa's personality and behaviors at school, including progress toward such early academic skills as writing her name. Jean also showed Luisa other classwork to illustrate Teresa's progress since beginning the early childhood program. At that point, the teacher highlighted how well Teresa was performing in the program while referring to a drawing from Teresa's work sample portfolio. At the end of the conference excerpt below, the teacher stated, "I don't know what we're gonna do with her next year," which was ambiguous and could be interpreted as an admission ("We can't help your daughter") or as a compliment ("Your daughter is so intelligent").

Given Jean's previous talk and, likely, Luisa's understanding of her daughter's capabilities, Luisa may have believed that the early childhood program could not meet Teresa's needs. However, the next set of teacher statements, in effect, acted to exacerbate Luisa's possible misunderstandings about Teresa's future program, because Jean indicated that despite Teresa's desire to go to kindergarten, Teresa needed to wait one more year. Furthermore, at the end of this transcript excerpt, while laughing and adding, "Mom, you're going
to have your hands busy," Jean appeared to suggest that Teresa would engage in challenging behavior at home if she continued in the early childhood program for the next school year.

Jean: She's got maybe some round circles in the beginning. But in February here, she definitely has a head, she's got the body, the leg, her arms, her hands, mouth, features, hair.

Luisa: Mm-hmm.

Jean: So, she really sees and distinguishes the differences there.

Luisa: Yeah.

Jean: So . . . I don't know what we're gonna do with her next year.

Luisa: (Laughs)

Jean: She tells keeps telling me, "When I turn five, I'm going to school." So we're trying to get her to understand that she's gonna turn five, but she's gonna have to wait, you know. And she doesn't wanna hear that. She wants to go to school right when . . .

TA: Right now.

Jean: She turns five (laughs). Like, like, okay, mom, you're gonna have your hands busy (laughs).

What could the teacher have done differently?

First, the parent-teacher conference should occur within the context of ongoing, positive relationships and with kindergarten transition conceived as a process over time, in which systematic school, family, and community supports are developed for Teresa's learning. In this way, as Doucet and Judige (2007) note, schools and teachers can be ready for individual children, rather than children being considered "ready for kindergarten." Jean and Luisa can talk freely about child strengths and competencies in need of greater support and how kindergarten transition is important to Teresa's later school success. Trust and respect between parents and early educators can be established, so that Luisa would recognize that Jean is presenting her opinion about what is best for Teresa; likewise, Luisa's perspective as a parent can be heard and acknowledged, rather than ignored (Jimenez-Silva, 2009). Jean could ask Luisa for her priorities regarding her child's learning and discuss ways to support the identified skills.

Moreover, Jean correctly began the conference with positives about the child; however, she could paint a more accurate picture from the beginning, saying, "Teresa is doing well, but we still have some concerns; she needs our support. Let's talk about these in turn and please tell me what you think." Additionally, because the procedures for children's transition from early childhood programs to kindergarten can vary, Jean could have explained any regulations affecting the transition (e.g., the age at which children are able to begin kindergarten) as well as other educational choices for Teresa (e.g., community-based enrichment programs) to support Teresa's skills.

Finally, here and throughout the conference, Jean could have clarified the meaning of her talk and checked for Luisa's comprehension, ensuring that Luisa understands the literal and figurative meaning of such statements as "I don't know what we're gonna do with her next year."

Jean could have done the following:

- Reconceptualize kindergarten transition as child- and relationship-centered, such that Teresa's skills and needed supports are collaboratively planned with school, family, and community (i.e., kindergarten will be ready for Teresa).
- Ensure an ongoing, positive, and respectful relationship between Jean and Luisa, in which Teresa's competencies can be directly discussed.
- Discuss with Luisa the importance of kindergarten transition for Teresa's school success.
- Hold regular discussions with Luisa about kindergarten transition, Teresa's skills, and the supports she needs from school, family, and community as preparation for kindergarten. Explain to Luisa the relevant rules and procedures regarding transition to kindergarten.
- Carefully select phrases and sentences to ensure that Luisa can understand and participate in conference discussions in English.

The Mother's First Advocacy Attempt. Luisa showed her belief that Teresa should be in kindergarten for the next school year. In response to Jean's mixed messages (i.e., Teresa is doing well at the early childhood program, but she is not ready to move to kindergarten), Luisa began to subtly advocate for her daughter's move to kindergarten. Luisa began with an appeal to the authority of her son's teachers at Lincoln Elementary School, who said that Teresa was ready for kindergarten.

In response, Jean and the teaching assistant provided token agreement that Teresa was ready for kindergarten (i.e., "Yeah. She is"). However, they also gave a reason for Teresa remaining in her
current early childhood program. Referring to the teachers at Lincoln School, Jean said, "I would check if you could get [the teachers] to see... social emotional might be an area where... [the teachers] might say, 'Okay, let's still hold her off 'till she turns five.'" In another example of Jean's indirect (and possibly confusing) language, the use of "might" suggested that Lincoln School teachers would probably (rather than certainly) agree that Teresa was not ready for kindergarten. In this way, Jean indicated that if the Lincoln School teachers knew about Teresa's as-yet-unspecified socio-emotional difficulties, they would likely have agreed that she was not ready for kindergarten.

Next, Jean provided the most detailed explanation of Teresa's perceived socio-emotional weaknesses, saying, "If something doesn't go her way, she will cry or she will pout." The fact that Teresa's early academic skills were appropriate for kindergarten likely played a significant role in Luisa believing that her child was ready for kindergarten. Furthermore, Luisa may have believed, like some Latino parents, that she had prepared her child for school by teaching Teresa to be respectful and teaching her to behave and may have believed that other needed skills would be taught by the school (Valdez, 1996). Furthermore, coming from a Latino immigrant background, it is possible that Luisa saw the school's role as academic (Valdez, 1996) and not necessarily concerned with issues related to socio-emotional competence.

Luisa: She went with me to the Lincoln School for a parent-teacher conference too. And, uh, teacher for Diego and Gonzalo, they say Teresa is ready for kindergarten.
Jean: Yeah. She is.
TA: Uh huh, she is.
Jean: She really is. If there was... I would check if you could get her to see if she... social emotional might be the area where she, they might say, "Okay, let's still hold her off 'till she turns five."
Luisa: Uh-hm.
Jean: She still likes to, if something doesn't go her way, she will cry or she will pout.
Luisa: Yeah.
Jean: You know. Maybe give her another way. Let her... but as far as cutting, writing, academic wise.
Luisa: Uh-huh.
Jean: She's ready. She's ready.
Luisa: Yeah.
Jean: It's that social emotional area right there that they may say, let's hold off.

As the talk continued, Luisa again tried to persuade Jean that Teresa was ready for kindergarten by referencing important sibling relationships: "She wanna go to the Lincoln because Diego and Gonzalo is there," referring to Teresa's older brothers. "The teaching assistant's laughter and dismissal—"I know she said that every day"—showed resistance to Luisa's suggestion that wanting to be with siblings is a reason to begin kindergarten, thus failing to recognize the cultural value of familism.

Persistently, Luisa gave an emphatic voice to Teresa's words—"She say, she say, 'I wanna go now now'"—to which the teaching assistant again dismissively laughed. Rather than talking about Teresa's socio-emotional competencies, the teachers took charge by referencing a different and less compelling reason for the child wanting to attend kindergarten; that is, most children want to ride the school bus with their siblings. Interestingly, Jean's verb use may have been confusing for Luisa: Rather than "that would be great" (i.e., "it would be great if the children could attend the same school, but that's not possible"). Jean said "this is great" (i.e., "Your idea to have the children attend the same school is great").

Luisa: But she wanna go to the Lincoln because Diego and Gonzalo is there.
TA: (Laughs) I know. She said that every day.
Luisa: So she say, she say, "I wanna go now now."
TA: (Laughs)
Luisa: Yeah.
Jean: This is great, because when they're getting on the bus going to school, she's also getting on the bus going to school, too.
Luisa: Uh-hmm.

What could the teacher have done differently? Based on the conference talk, Jean could have recognized Luisa's desire to have her daughter move to kindergarten. Again, rather than attempting to do this during a single conference, transition planning over time would require dialogue—one including the kindergarten teacher. Engagement in deeper discussion can center not just on Teresa's current skills, based on multiple sources of information, but also on needed kindergarten supports. A kindergarten transition plan could be developed to include timelines and learning activities to support Teresa, as well as brainstorming to identify the person responsible for carrying out learning activities (see Plante & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, for suggestions). Discussion of transition planning also should include...
identification of beliefs regarding the roles of parents and teachers and a discussion of how these roles may have to be negotiated.

In the above discussion, mutual understandings of the teacher's and mother's perspectives could be explored. For instance, Jean could talk about the importance of children's socio-emotional competence to their overall learning. Jean and the kindergarten teacher also could talk about behavioral expectations for kindergarteners. Likewise, Luisa could be encouraged to share her thoughts about Teresa's socio-emotional skills within the context of the home and community. In this case, because Luisa has two children already in higher grades, she likely understands much about kindergarten children's expected competencies. Additionally, Luisa's desire to keep the siblings together should be validated and acknowledged, not simply dismissed.

Jean could have done the following:
- Recognize Luisa's explanations for Teresa transitioning to kindergarten as advocacy for her daughter.
- Emphasize individualization in the collection of multiple sources of information about Teresa's current competencies.
- Identify Luisa's and Jean's beliefs regarding their roles in Teresa's education.
- Discuss the importance of socio-emotional competence for Teresa's learning.
- Take time for meaningful transition planning with Luisa and the receiving kindergarten teacher.
- Build on Luisa's knowledge and family strengths (e.g., knowledge of children, the school system, educational expectations, and experiences for Teresa's siblings) during transition decision-making.
- Explore with Luisa the priorities involved in transitioning to kindergarten and discuss how these could be incorporated into plans for transition.

The Mother's Second Advocacy Attempt. Later in the conference, when setting child learning goals for the next program year, Jean asked Luisa to suggest a goal for Teresa. Before Luisa could respond, the teaching assistant again confirmed that Teresa was performing well, saying: "Well, she's writing her name," to which the mother replied that her daughter did not need a learning goal: "She knows everything." Jean initially resisted the mother's assessment. Next, the group laughed, which moved the talk away from the seriousness of Luisa's belief about her daughter.

Again, Luisa advocated for her daughter's move to kindergarten, stating that she heard from her daughter that she knows so much (i.e., "I know this, I know that"), implying that no goals were appropriate for Teresa at the early childhood center. Jean said that Teresa could further develop her socio-emotional skills—specifically, by using words instead of misbehaving when upset. The teaching assistant agreed with Jean's proposed goal. Importantly, no discussion occurred here regarding how the goal is related to kindergarten transition and the cultural or familial appropriateness of this common socio-emotional competency. Luisa reluctantly agreed, whispering, "Uh-huh."

Jean: Okay. Is there a goal that you would like to see us achieve for her... at the end of this year? Before next year?
TA: Well, she's writing her name.
Luisa: Oh, she knows everything.
Jean: Yeah. (Laughs)
((Group laughs))
Luisa: I have to have sometimes and, "I know this, I know that." Well, okay. (Laughs)
Jean: Could we maybe work on her using her words to express herself? Instead of shutting down and...
TA: ... getting upset.
Luisa: Uh-huh. (Said quietly)

What could the teacher have done differently?
Learning goals and their importance to Teresa's success in kindergarten should be discussed with Luisa. To better understand what is behind Luisa's perspectives, Jean could initiate discussion about Teresa's learning goals by asking what Luisa's priorities were for her daughter. Rather than ignoring Luisa's suggestion that her daughter had learned everything that the preschool program could offer, Jean could directly address it. The teacher and parent could discuss the importance of children labeling emotions in kindergarten and what supports are needed for success. Critical to this discussion may be the cultural importance of putting words to emotions, which can vary considerably from one culture to another, and within the same cultural background (Cervantes, 2002). This discussion also can lead to collaborative decisions regarding Teresa's learning goals.

Jean could have done the following:
- Support Luisa's understanding of why children's learning goals are important and where they fit
within Teresa's early education.

- Directly address Luisa's concerns about Teresa's current program not meeting her needs and Luisa's attempts at advocacy for her daughter.
- Collaboratively develop Teresa's formal learning goals and multifaceted strategies to attain them, including socio-emotional goals to assist her transition to kindergarten.

The Mother's Final Advocacy Attempt. Near the end of the conference, Luisa once more determinedly raised the issue of Teresa's future program. As Jean completed paperwork, she reported on other aspects of Teresa's performance, evaluating them positively and emphasizing Teresa's high intelligence (i.e., "Teresa really is a smart little girl"). Luisa made a final attempt to persuade Jean to move her daughter to kindergarten by again appealing to the authority of a 1st-grade teacher at Lincoln School, to whom she referred by name ("Mrs. Seftan"). However, rather than respond to Luisa, Jean took control of the discussion by abruptly shifting the topic: she asked what language Luisa used with her child at home. In responding to Jean's question, Luisa's advocacy efforts for her daughter ended.

Jean: Teresa really is a smart little girl. She really, she loves to be around the kids and, you know, talk with them and play with them and dance. She likes to dance—she's always one you can count on her leading the group.

TA: She'll be singin' and dancin'.

Luisa: I told you she's, uh, talk to Mrs. Seftan? First grade.

Jean: Uh-huh. Yeah, uh-huh.

Luisa: And she said Teresa is ready for kindergarten. She knows everything.

Jean: Now at home, do you talk to Teresa more in English or in Spanish?

Luisa: Uh, she likes talk more in English.

What could the teacher have done differently?

Luisa's final initiation of discussion regarding Teresa moving to kindergarten was another opportunity for Jean to explore Luisa's perspectives. Jean needed to know about the culture(s) of parents from Latino backgrounds and the culture of the family in order to recognize the effort Luisa and repeatedly advocating for Teresa's kindergarten placement. Advocacy to teachers who hold a higher education level and esteemed positions can contradict cultural norms (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2000). Therefore, Jean could recognize that Luisa's subtle advocacy attempts indicated her strong feelings about her daughter's kindergarten placement.

Moreover, because partnerships include collaborative decision-making, assuming that school policies would allow Teresa to attend kindergarten, Jean would defer to Luisa's expertise, because as a parent, Luisa knows her daughter best and, like Jean, wants the best for her. Luisa's perspective regarding Teresa's kindergarten placement is likely related to: 1) what she knows about kindergarten, based on her older children's experiences; 2) her estimation of Teresa's capabilities; and 3) culturally based assumptions about the appropriateness of children labeling their emotions. To better support Teresa, Jean could brainstorm with Luisa about supplementary, summer strategies to support agreed-upon socio-emotional skills as Teresa's preparation for kindergarten.

Jean could have done the following:

- Recognize and act on Luisa's repeated, subtle advocacy attempts on Teresa's behalf.
- As appropriate, defer to Luisa's expertise regarding her daughter's competencies.
- Brainstorm with Luisa as they prepare Teresa for kindergarten, by discussing community and home activities to support her success.

In conclusion, the ongoing parent-teacher conference discussion between Jean and Luisa reveals opportunities for early educators to form partnerships with immigrant Latino families. Clearly, such factors as culture (e.g., some parents' difficulty advocating for their children to teachers, the importance of family relationships); language use (e.g., sentence grammar, meanings of utterances); and power (e.g., teachers' tendency to act as experts and make decisions for parents) are important to partnerships. With knowledge, understanding, and effort, effective partnerships with immigrant Latino parents can be established and maintained in the best interests of young children.

References


