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### Characteristics and Motivation of Spanish- Speaking Latinx Families of Children With Disabilities Engaged in a Family Support Group

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATION OF SPANISH-  
SPEAKING LATINX FAMILIES OF CHILDREN  
WITH DISABILITIES ENGAGED IN A  
FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Sandra Helena Rasmussen

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Special Education

August 2020

This Dissertation by: Sandra Helena Rasmussen

Entitled: *Characteristics and Motivation of Spanish-Speaking Latinx Families of Children with Disabilities Engaged in a Family Support Group*

has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in the School of Special Education

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## ABSTRACT

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English learners consistently demonstrate achievement gaps with family educational engagement being one method to improve student academic achievement, however, culturally and linguistically diverse families engage less due to cultural and language differences as well as due to motivational barriers. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to add to the limited literature by gaining insights into the motivational reasons of Spanish-speaking families to engage in a family support group. The motivational findings from two focus groups and 4 individual interviews with Spanish-speaking families were then related to models and recommendations for family engagement to add to our understanding of how to effectively engage Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities. Common family motivational findings related to issues with special education staff and services which lead to feelings like they had to fight for their child's services. Additionally, common family motivation results indicated that families sought support and information that they were not finding in the schools. Findings indicated that the family support group aligned with areas of Epstein's (2010) as well as to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) models of family engagement

which empowered families. Further analysis also indicated that the family support group aligned well with recommendations for culturally responsive practices and the six indicators of collaborative partnerships while the schools did not. Results indicated that special education teams can improve their relationships with families by offering support and information while aligning with culturally and responsive practices as well as indicators of collaborative partnerships.

*Keywords:* collaborative partnership indicators, culturally and linguistically diverse, culturally responsive practices, English learner, empowerment, family educational engagement, special education, Latinx, motivation, Spanish-speaking families

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities who strive to obtain the best for their children so that they can reach their maximum potential. I have spent the past 20 years working with such families and am constantly humbled by their dedication and perseverance in seeking help for their children despite encountering adverse circumstances. My experiences in supporting Spanish-speaking families have added so much depth to my life and these families continue to inspire me to improve their access to special education. I also dedicate this to my family and friends who honored the space and time I needed to work, pushed me when I faltered, listened to me when I felt defeated, and inspired me to continue. I am so very thankful that I have such a wonderful family and dear friends who patiently supported me during the several years it took to complete my doctoral degree.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Recently, I sat in a special education eligibility meeting with Mrs. Sanchez, a monolingual Spanish-speaking mother. This was Mrs. Sanchez' first special education eligibility meeting, and she sat quietly, appearing nervous. There were four special education professionals at the table as well as the classroom teacher and the interpreter. I was there in my role as the district's multicultural consultant to ensure that the child's eligibility determination was non-discriminatory and considered his cultural and language differences.

There was lots of chatter and different people talking to each other as we waited to begin, and no one except the interpreter talked with Mrs. Sanchez. The meeting began, and every participant introduced themselves and then took turns talking about their evaluation results quickly because the meeting needed to be completed in one hour to accommodate the classroom teacher's schedule. Even though the interpreter was translating what was being said, the special education staff spoke rapidly and used many technical terms. When each person was done, they would look at Mrs. Sanchez and ask very happily if she had any questions. Each time this was done, Mrs. Sanchez looked very uncomfortable, and I felt like she did not totally understand what the evaluation results meant and, therefore, had no idea what questions to ask.

When it came time to determine if her son was eligible for special education, Mrs. Sanchez agreed with everything asked and signed that she agreed that her son qualified as a student with a learning disability in reading. It became very clear that Mrs. Sanchez had not received enough explanation nor understood the evaluation results and special education eligibility when she asked the interpreter at the end if her son was going to get some extra help and who was going to help him.

#### **Personal Reflection**

I am a bilingual speech-language pathologist and have worked for the past 19 years with Spanish-speaking families in providing special education evaluation, determining eligibility for special education, developing individualized education programs (IEPs), providing speech and language support, as well as providing family and teacher education. As illustrated in my story about Mrs. Sanchez, her lack of

understanding of what occurred in the special education meeting represents to me the barriers that I encounter on a daily basis in my work as part of a special education team. While I feel that special education staff is well-meaning and want what is best for the child, parents, and families who are not proficient English speakers who are often lost and overwhelmed during special education meetings, the staff provides too much information in technical terms that is meaningless to these families. I often encounter Spanish-speaking families that have had different educational experiences and, therefore, do not understand what special education is in the U.S., the process for a child to become eligible and receive services, nor their parental rights. All the Spanish-speaking families I have met clearly value and want to support their child's education and feel like they are fulfilling their educational support role while not understanding that the school has different expectations. Because of this, I have spent these years training and modeling for special education staff the need to slow down and explain everything in a manner that is understandable and relevant. I have also spent time counseling Spanish-speaking families by walking them through the special education process and how it works. Special education meetings, such as the one described above, are upsetting and uncomfortable for me because families like those of Mrs. Sanchez are not truly equal members in the special education process and, therefore, are not able to advocate for their child nor make informed decisions as prescribed by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004).

### **Terminology**

Two specific terms are used throughout this study, *Latinx* and *English learner*. The term *Latinx* is used in this study instead of *Latino* or *Latina* because it is a gender-neutral term that refers to a person of Latin American descent (Rodriguez, 2019). The

term *English learner* (EL) is used in this study instead of *English language learner* because *English learner* is a term used in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016, September 23). Every Student Succeeds Act defines the term *English learner* as an individual who is enrolled in elementary or secondary school, who was not born in the U.S., or whose native language is a language other than English. In addition, ESSA defines an EL as an individual who has difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language which may impede their ability to meet state academic standards and succeed in classrooms where English is the language of instruction (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016, September 23).

### **Significance of the Study**

The student population in U.S. public schools is changing, becoming more varied due to the rising number of racially and ethnically diverse students (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Latinx students have been growing at the fastest rate (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017), and students identified as ELs are also growing in number (U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2018). Students identified as ELs include students who have a variety of different home languages with the majority of ELs identified as Latinx (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017) and Spanish identified as the most prevalent home language (McFarland, 2016). English learners fall under an umbrella term, *culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD), which is used by the U.S. Department of Education to include both non-English and limited-English proficient students as well

as students who have backgrounds that vary based on different social, cultural, and economic experiences (Gonzalez, Pagan, Wendell, & Love, 2011).

English learners demonstrate achievement gaps in education such as scoring lower on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in reading and math when compared to their non-EL peers (Murphey, 2014). The reasons for such an achievement gap can be complex due to the interaction of a variety of factors such as socioeconomic status (SES), country of origin, and segregation of ELs into specific schools (Portes & Hao, 2004) as well as due to the challenge ELs face of learning academic content in English while also learning the English language (Linan-Thompson, Lara-Martinez, & Cavazos, 2018). Schools that have high numbers of ELs with low SES can struggle due to difficulty attracting quality teachers, a poorer school climate, and lower teacher expectations which can contribute to lower achievement (Portes & Hao, 2004). Poor academic achievement can also be reflected in grade retention trends (Andrew, 2014) with ELs retained more often than the overall student population (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, 2016, March). Poor achievement rates can also be seen in high school graduation rates with ELs having lower graduation rates when compared to overall graduation rates (Sanchez, 2017).

English learners are overrepresented in special education which can be related to poor achievement rates (NCES, 2018), with Latinx students being the most overrepresented minority group in special education (Klingner, Artiles, & Mendez-Barletta, 2006). English learners may be over-identified in special education due to lack of understanding of how second language learning can impact academic achievement,



inadequate instruction, academic interventions, and use of educational assessment instruments (Sánchez, Parker, Akbayin, & McTigue, 2010) with the largest impact due to lack of appropriate preparation of general education and special education teachers to ensure that ELs have appropriate support in order to access their instruction and curriculum (Burr, Hass, & Ferriere, 2015).

One manner to improve academic achievement of ELs is by improving their family's engagement in their education (Banerjee, Harrell, & Johnson, 2011; Jeynes, 2012). Family educational engagement can be defined by what the family does at home and what families do at school to support their child's education (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Home-based educational engagement includes activities that families do in the home to support their child's learning which can include homework support, reviewing for a test, as well as monitoring their child's academic progress (Green et al., 2007). School-based engagement involves activities families engage in at school to support their child's education such as attending school events, parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering at the school (Green et al., 2007).

Family engagement's positive impact on academic achievement is well-established in the literature (Grolnick, 2015; Reynolds, Crea, Medina, Degnan, & McRoy, 2015), including reduction of dropout and truancy rates (McNeal, 1999) while improving attendance (Sheldon, 2007). Family engagement also has been shown to have a positive impact on self-regulatory skills (Daniel, Wang, & Berthelsen, 2016) and to promote higher self-esteem in students (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009). Because of this, policy and laws exist that promote the role of families in the education of their children (Mapp, 2012). Currently, ESSA continues to support family educational engagement,

directing schools to connect with families and include family engagement in school district's plans (Henderson, 2016).

Family educational engagement has been shown to have a positive impact on the academic achievement of students with disabilities as well (Newman, 2004). Positive impact of family engagement has been shown to result in higher grades (Newman, 2004), improved rates of high school graduation (Doren, Gau, & Lindstrom, 2012), and higher rates of post-graduation employment (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2012). The IDEA (2004) recognized the importance of family engagement in a child's education by mandating family involvement in special education; IDEA's (2004) mandate directed special education teams to include families in the decision-making and program planning process. The IDEA also mandated that schools provide access for families who are not proficient English speakers so that they can also fully participate in their child's special education decision-making and program planning (Cummins & Hardin, 2017) through the provision of interpreters and translation of special education documents (Rossetti, Sauer, Bui, & Ou, 2017). Family educational engagement is recognized as an important component in special education as indicated in IDEA (IDEA, 2004; Wolfe & Durán, 2013), with the intent that families and schools collaborate in order to create and carry out shared goals for academic progress for students with disabilities (MacLeod, Causton, Radel, & Radel, 2017).

For the purposes of this study, the term *family* is used to describe collaboration and interaction between not only a child's parent, but also the family and/or caregiver and the school staff. Furthermore, the term *engagement* is used in the study because *engagement* depicts families as active partners in their child's education (Minnesota

Parent Training and Information Center, 2015). In addition, in this study I will use the *family engagement* definition by Green et al. (2007) that includes home-based and school-based family activities that support children's academic achievement with a focus on school-based engagement in special education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Family engagement is influenced by SES, ethnicity, cultural background, and family characteristics, with families with higher SES having higher levels of engagement than those with lower SES (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Families with lower SES may face barriers to being engaged in their children's education due to lack of time and resources available to allocate to their children's education (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Culturally and linguistically diverse families generally have been found to be less engaged as well when compared to other families (Wong & Hughes, 2006) with educators attributing CLD families' limited engagement to lack of motivation and concern and not valuing their children's education (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Despite educators attributing CLD families' limited engagement to not valuing their children's education, diverse families do value education and want to be engaged, but may engage in ways not valued by the school (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Culturally and linguistically diverse families, including Latinx families, may have difficulty fully engaging in the children's education due to limited English proficiency (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010) and cultural barriers such as lack of familiarity with the U.S. educational system (Goldsmith & Robinson Kurpius, 2018; Park & Holloway, 2013). Motivational barriers can also impact CLD families' engagement

when they do not feel welcomed or respected or their input and expertise is not valued (Shah, 2009).

Latinx families report that their child's education is important; however, they may define their roles and responsibilities in supporting their children's education differently than other families (Auerbach, 2007). For example, Latinx families engage in the children's education by providing their children with advice and teaching regarding their manners, appropriate behavior, discipline, morals and respect for elders as well as homework support, and discussions about future goals (Auerbach, 2007; Ceballo, Maurizi, Suarez, & Aretakis, 2014). In addition, Latinx families generally have high esteem for teachers and will defer to the teachers' opinions and expertise when making decisions about their children's education, therefore, communicating less and having less feeling of shared responsibilities for their children's education when compared to other families (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Zarate, 2007).

Culturally and linguistically diverse families also have similar difficulties in fully engaging in the special education programming and advocating for their children due to language and cultural barriers (Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin, Mereoiu, Hung, & Roach-Scott, 2009; Hee Lee, Rocco Dillon, French, & Kyungjin, 2018; Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002; Park, Turnbull, & Park, 2001; Salas, 2004). Limited English proficiency is identified as the biggest barrier that impedes CLD families from forming good relationships with special education teachers which may be the reason why many CLD families are perceived as being passive participants in their children's special education program (Lee & Park, 2016). The frequent use of specific medical vocabulary and education jargon is reported by CLD families as being very difficult to understand

and for interpreters to translate (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; Jegatheesan, 2009; Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004). Moreover, Salas (2004) felt that the use of medical terminology and education jargon in special education reflected an imbalance of social power with such vocabulary used to specifically exclude families from being able to fully participate and advocate for their children with disabilities (Cohen, 2014).

Culturally and linguistically diverse families can also face other barriers such as uneven power dynamics with school personnel wielding greater power than families when making educational decisions regarding their children (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012), which can be a universal challenge for all families. Motivational barriers also play a role in impacting CLD families' willingness to become engaged in the children's education such as not feeling welcomed or respected or not having their input or expertise valued (Shah, 2009). Research has indicated that Latinx families engage more when they feel respected and their parental roles, aspirations, life experiences, and knowledge are valued (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012).

Culturally and linguistically diverse as well as Latinx families face barriers to become fully engaged in their child's education, but two models of family engagement can be used as guidance to improve engagement. Epstein's (Epstein, 2010) Spheres of Influence family engagement model and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) model provide asset-based models that illustrates how to improve overall family engagement, as well as CLD family engagement, by promoting a positive school environment, effectively communicating, and offering numerous opportunities for family-teacher interactions that are accommodating to their schedules and needs. Additionally, through frequent school-teacher interactions, CLD families and teachers

can gain social capital and social control by increasing their understanding of each other's beliefs and expectations as well as by providing consistent academic and behavioral expectations (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Culturally and linguistically diverse family engagement can also be improved by implementing culturally responsive practices (Harry, 2008) in conjunction with the six indicators of successful collaborative relationships (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). Culturally responsive practices include enhancing school-home relationships, reinforcing familial knowledge, identifying and using what works for CLD families, and promoting cultural awareness (Harry, 2008). These practices can be implemented while focusing on fostering the six collaborative partnership characteristics of communication, commitment, equality, professional competence, mutual trust, and mutual respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). A more detailed discussion of these practices is included in Chapter II.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the motivation of Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities to engage in their child's education due to the documented benefits of family engagement. Family engagement in education has been linked to improved academic outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2011; Jeynes, 2012), improved student motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Doan Holbein, 2005), and improved attendance (Sheldon, 2007). Family engagement also has a positive impact on academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Carter et al., 2012; Doren et al., 2012; Newman, 2004).

However, CLD families may face barriers that impede their ability to engage due to cultural and language barriers (Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009; Hee Lee et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; Park et al., 2001; Salas, 2004). Latinx Spanish-speaking families also encounter cultural and language barriers when attempting to engage in their children's special education program which results in a lower level of engagement as well as limited ability to effectively advocate for their children (Hardin et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2002; Salas, 2004). Such barriers could result in less engagement (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Wong & Hughes, 2006) which can lead to teachers and principals to interpret Latinx families' limited engagement as a lack of motivation, concern, or value for their children's education (Lopez et al., 2001).

Motivation plays an important role in CLD family engagement in general and special education (Shah, 2009). While barriers have been identified related to cultural and language differences, there is a lack of research on the reasons or motivation of Latinx families to be engaged. Three studies were found that showed that Latinx families' engagement improved when they were more motivated to engage as a result of feeling they were represented in decision-making (Shah, 2009), when their expertise and insights were valued and respected (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012), and when they received direct invitations to engage from their child or a teacher (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2011).

In order to gain further understanding of Latinx family motivation to engage, this study focused on identifying the common characteristics and motivation of a group of Spanish-speaking families that chose to regularly attend support group meetings. Spanish-speaking participants were interviewed in focus groups and individually in order

to identify this group's common characteristics and motivation. Observation of the family support group as well as journaling were also done during the study. It was my goal that the results of this study could then be compared to current models of family engagement as well as current recommendations to improve engagement. The findings of this study could inform special education teams on how to increase Latinx family motivation which will increase their engagement in the special education process and programming for their child. The overarching goal was to strive to obtain true equity in special education for Latinx families while also meeting the family collaboration intent of IDEA (2004).

### **Research Questions**

To address a gap in the research, this study sought to better understand the motivation of Latinx Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities to engage in their child's education with the following research questions posed.

- Q1 What are the common characteristics of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability and choose to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q2 What are the motivations of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q3 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current models of family engagement?
- Q4 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current recommendations that enhance diverse parental/familiar participation in education?

The Latinx student population in public schools is growing at a fast rate (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017) as are students identified as ELs (NCES, 2018). The majority of ELs are identified as Latinx (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017) and Spanish as the most common home language (McFarland, 2016). English learners are overrepresented in special



education (NCES, 2018) which can relate to misunderstanding the impact second language learning has on academic achievement (Sánchez et al., 2010). Family engagement is one way to improve academic achievement of ELs (Banerjee et al., 2011; Jeynes, 2012) as well as students with disabilities (Newman, 2004). The importance of family engagement in special education is recognized in IDEA (IDEA, 2004; Wolfe & Durán, 2013) which delineates the role that families have in collaborating with schools to support the academic progress of students with disabilities (MacLeod et al., 2017).

Latinx Spanish-speaking families encounter cultural and language barriers when attempting to engage in their children's special education program which results in a lower level of engagement as well as limited ability to effectively advocate for their children (Hardin et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2002; Salas, 2004). Motivating families to engage is one aspect of family engagement that schools can address in order to improve academic achievement (Shah, 2009); however, few studies have explored Latinx families' motivation for family engagement.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

The following terms used in this study are defined below:

*Culturally and linguistically diverse.* Children who are English learners and families who are non-English proficient can be identified under the broad umbrella term *culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD). The International Center for Leadership in Education defines CLD as students whose home language is not English and who have diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds (Gonzalez et al., 2011). The International Center for Leadership in Education states CLD is a preferred term because it acknowledges that diverse students have differences and needs that are more extensive than learning English (Gonzalez et al., 2011).

*English learner.* The ESSA defines the term *English learner* as an individual who is enrolled in elementary or secondary school, who was not born in the U.S. or whose native language is a language other than English, and who has difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language which may impede their ability to meet state academic standards and succeed in classrooms where English is the language of instruction (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016).

*Family.* The term *family* is used in this study because it describes the collaboration and interaction between not only a child's parent, but also the family and/or caregiver and the school staff which reflects more accurately the diverse family composition that may not reflect the traditional two-parent family (Livingston, 2014).

*Family engagement.* The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012) defines *family engagement* in education as the collaborative partnership and shared responsibility of schools and families to enhance the learning and development of children. The term *engagement* is used instead of *involvement* in this study because *engagement* depicts families as active partners in their child's education (Minnesota Parent Training and Information Center, 2015).

*Individualized education program.* The Center for Parent Information and Resources defines an individualized education program (IEP) as "a written statement of the educational program designed to meet a child's individual needs" (2017a, August 1, para.1). The IEP is created by the special education team that includes the families by reviewing current assessment information and developing an IEP tailored to the child's

educational disability-related needs (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2017a, August 1).

*Informed consent.* The IDEA (2004) defines *consent* as informed written consent which means that families are provided a written notice that completely informs them of proposed special education actions and the reasons for such actions (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2017b, November 3). *Consent* also means that families understand and agree in writing to special education actions with all information provided in the families' native language (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2017b, November 3).

*Latinx.* The term *Latinx* is used in this study instead of *Latino* or *Latina* because, while controversial, it is a gender-neutral term that refers to a person of Latin American descent (Rodriguez, 2019).

*Motivation.* The term *motivation* in this study is defined by the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler family engagement model that includes personal psychological beliefs, contextual motivators of involvement, and perceptions of life-context variables (Walker et al., 2011). Walker et al. (2011) defined personal psychological motivators as the family's role construction or their beliefs on their role in their child's education. Walker et al. further defined personal psychological motivators as the family's sense of self-efficacy or how well they are able to help their child succeed in school. Walker et al. also defined contextual motivators of involvement as general invitations by the child or school to be engaged. This includes if the family feels the school is welcoming and positive as well as encouraging. Perceived life-context variables are defined by Walker et al. as the

influences that impact a family to engage in their child's education such as their ideas if their own skills and knowledge are sufficient to support their child's learning.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to better understand the motivation of Spanish-speaking families to engage in their child's education. To address a gap in the research, the following research questions were posed:

- Q1 What are the common characteristics of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability and choose to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q2 What are the motivations of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q3 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current models of family engagement?
- Q4 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current recommendations that enhance diverse parental/familiar participation in education?

In this chapter, I review literature that covers different topics in order to explore the interface of multiple phenomena that relate to my research questions. My study aimed to gain new insights into how to improve the engagement of Spanish-speaking Latinx families who have children with disabilities by exploring the common characteristics and motivation of a specific group of Spanish-speaking Latinx families who choose to be engaged in a family support group. My study also sought to add to the limited research that exists on the motivation of Latinx families to engage by exploring the reasons why Spanish-speaking Latinx families seek out engagement. In addition, I sought to find common characteristics of Spanish-speaking families that seek out engagement because

these may provide insights into foundational reasons that motivate families. Based on my research questions, the six topics I covered in my literature review are: (a) changing demographics in public schools, (b) family engagement in general education and special education, (c) models and theory of family engagement, (d) culturally and linguistically diverse family engagement, (e) barriers to family engagement, and (f) recommendations to foster collaborative relationships with families using culturally responsive practices.

### **Changing Demographics**

The demographics of public schools in the U.S. are changing due to a growing number of minority students with diverse cultural and language backgrounds. According to the NCES (2018), between 2000 and 2015, the number of U.S. public school students identified as White decreased from 62% to 52%, while the number of racially and ethnically diverse students grew from 36% to 48% (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). In addition, those identified as Hispanic grew at the fastest rate (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017).

This trend is also reflected in the number of students identified as English ELs which grew between 2000 and 2015 from 8.1% to 9.5% (NCES, 2018). However, as expected, there were a greater number of students identified as ELs in the lower grades than in the upper grades, since many ELs attain fluent English proficiency as they reach higher grades and no longer are identified as EL. For example, in 2015, while 16.3% of kindergartners in U.S. public schools were identified as EL, only 3.9% in twelfth graders had such a designation (NCES, 2018).

English learners are a diverse group, representing children with different home languages (McFarland, 2016). Spanish is the most prevalent home language reported, followed by Arabic and Chinese (McFarland, 2016). In 2014, within all students

identified as EL, 78.1%, or the majority, identified as Hispanic, with lower percentages for other racial groups, such as Asians making up the second largest group with 10.6% (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). The third lowest group, or 5.8% of students, identified as White, and students identified as Black comprised 3.5% of the total EL group (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017).

Children who are ELs and families who are non-English proficient can be identified under a broader umbrella term CLD. Culturally and linguistically diverse is a term, according to the International Center for Leadership in Education (Gonzalez et al., 2011), that is used by the U.S. Department of Education, which includes both non-English proficient and limited-English proficient students. The CLD term also includes students whose home language is not English and who come from "diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds" (Gonzalez et al., 2011, p. xiii). The International Center for Leadership in Education stated that the term *culturally and linguistically diverse* is a preferred term because it acknowledges that diverse students have differences and needs that are more extensive than merely support for learning English (Gonzalez et al., 2011). Due to this recommendation, the term CLD will be used in this study, when possible, in order to account for not only language differences, but also cultural differences that non-English proficient children and families experience. However, most research and data reports focus on ELs; therefore, when the term EL is used in this study, it reflects the terminology used in the research or data being discussed.

Academic achievement trajectories for ELs can be different than it is for monolingual English-speaking students (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018). Therefore, in the

next section, I explore EL academic achievement to illustrate issues that may not be well understood.

### **English Learner Achievement**

Learning academic content in English while also learning the English language can be challenging for many ELs (Linan-Thompson et al., 2018). Such a gap is illustrated in a research brief that reported a consistent achievement gap over time in reading and math for ELs (Murphey, 2014). When comparing EL fourth-grade reading scores and eighth-grade math scores to non-ELs, ELs had an achievement gap of approximately 40 percentage points on the National Assessment of Education Progress that persisted over time between 2000 and 2013 (Murphey, 2014). Achievement gaps for ELs may be attributed to many complex and interacting reasons ranging from SES and country of origin, to the segregation of ELs into particular schools based on low SES (Portes & Hao, 2004). Segregated schools based on low SES may differ in the quality of their teachers, in the climate of the school, and in teacher expectations thus leading to lower academic achievement (Portes & Hao, 2004). Moreover, inadequate teacher preparation for working with ELs may be an additional factor leading to a lack of understanding of how to appropriately adapt instruction and assessments (Matthews & Mellom, 2012). These types of limitations to quality education has been termed the opportunity gap because it highlights that the achievement gap seen in Black and Latino students is due to limited opportunities such as unequal access to quality schools, teachers, and resources needed to achieve (Carter & Welner, 2013). However, dual language immersion schools show promise because they have demonstrated improved academic outcomes for ELs, particularly in reading achievement (Rand Education, 2015).



In addition to an achievement gap, grade retention can also be an indicator of academic achievement challenges (Andrew, 2014). This is evident when looking at grade retention rates for ELs because they are retained in larger proportions than the overall proportion of students retained, with the largest over-representation of ELs retained occurring in high school (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, 2016). Further academic achievement challenges for ELs can be found when looking at overall national high school graduation rates (Deussen, Hanson, & Bisht, 2017), with ELs demonstrating overall lower graduation rates of 63% when compared to an overall graduation rate of 82% (Sanchez, 2017). Such poorer educational outcomes for ELs can significantly impact their future economic success as well as their future social equality (Amos, 2013). Therefore, when EL's chronic achievement gap is considered, it is not surprising to find that such low academic progress may be misunderstood and can lead to inappropriate referrals to special education for the identification of a potential learning disability (Ortiz et al., 2011). The next section explores the over-representation of ELs in special education.

### **English Learners with Disabilities**

In the area of special education, Zacarian (2011a) stated that “overrepresentation is a chronic issue that requires our attention” (p. 3). Overrepresentation of ELs in special education is illustrated in NCES's 2018 report that found in 2015, 13% of the entire student population was identified with a disability, while 14.7% of the total EL population were identified with a disability (NCES, 2018). These statistics validate concerns expressed by some researchers regarding overrepresentation of ELs with

disabilities (Hamayan, Marler, Sanchez Lopez, & Damico, 2007), particularly at the secondary level (Umansky et al., 2015). In 2011, Sullivan found that at the state level, ELs were overrepresented in the disability categories of Specific Learning Disability, Speech-Language Impairment, and Intellectual Disability. Furthermore, Latinx, who as a group include some ELs, have specifically been identified as a minority group that often are overrepresented in special education (Klingner et al., 2006).

Researchers have attributed such over-representation to several reasons. Sánchez et al. (2010) identified four possible reasons for misidentification such as poor understanding of second language development and disabilities, inadequate instruction, poor academic interventions, and use of assessment tools that are inappropriate. The largest impact or reason for over-representation can be attributed overall to lack of appropriate training and preparation of teachers and other special education professionals so that they have a good understanding of not only how to support ELs academically, but also understand that ELs often demonstrate a different learning trajectory than their monolingual English-speaking peers (Burr et al., 2015; Zacarian, 2011b).

Classroom teachers must have the training and expertise to not only adapt their classroom instruction and assessments for second language learners, but also be able to appropriately identify and provide targeted instruction for a learning difficulty that is beyond typical second language learner needs (Burr et al., 2015). In special education, this lack of adequate training can also lead to the misunderstanding that the use of standardized assessments to identify a learning disability may be biased and discriminatory against ELs because most of the assessments have been normed using monolingual English-speaking students (Burr et al., 2015).

The increase in ELs in public schools and difficulties with academic achievement and over-representation in special education depicts the issues faced by ELs and school professionals. One approach to improve academic outcomes is by improving family engagement because family engagement plays a significant role in improving academic achievement (Banerjee et al., 2011; Jeynes, 2012) and is a required component of special education programming (Wolfe & Durán, 2013); therefore, family engagement is explored further in the next section.

### **Family Engagement**

In order to gather a comprehensive illustration of what family educational engagement means, the definition of family engagement and the benefits are further explored in this section. In addition, the status of family engagement with CLD families as well as Latinx families is discussed, followed by legal guidance on family engagement in education. Family engagement models are then explored to help understand how to improve family engagement in education.

#### **Family Engagement Definition**

For the purposes of this study, the term *family* is used to describe collaboration and interaction between not only a child's parent, but also the family and/or caregiver and the school staff. Furthermore, the term *engagement* is used in the study instead of *involvement* because *engagement* depicts families as active partners in their child's education (Minnesota Parent Training and Information Center, 2015). Furthermore, the term *family engagement* is used in relation to educational engagement which can encompass different types of family actions and activities. A definition and benefits of

family engagement are discussed next in order to understand this broad term and how it relates to academic achievement.

Family engagement can be broadly defined in two contexts, home-based and school-based, characterized by particular actions and activities that families do to support their child's education (Green et al., 2007). Home-based engagement includes activities that families do in the home to support their child's learning which can include homework support, reviewing for a test, as well as monitoring their child's academic progress (Green et al., 2007). Home-based engagement can also include how families influence a child's behaviors and attitudes toward school (Green et al., 2007). School-based engagement involves activities families engage in at school to support their child's education such as attending school events, parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering at the school (Green et al., 2007).

In 1994, Grolnick and Slowiaczek suggested there were three types of family engagement that influence children's academic success: school, cognitive-intellectual, and personal involvement. School involvement was described as any type of activity that supported a child's academic success such as attending school activities and assisting with homework, while cognitive-intellectual involvement was described as family activities that supported cognitive development such as reading with their child (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). The third type proposed by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) was personal involvement that encompassed family monitoring of a child's educational progress, such as staying informed on their child's academic progress and what their child was currently learning in class. When examining these three types of involvement,

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) found that school involvement had the most powerful impact on children's academic progress and grades.

### **Benefits of Family Engagement**

For decades, according to Curry and Holter (2019), researchers, legislatures, and leaders in education have paid particular attention to family engagement in education. Stitt and Brooks (2014) stated that in the past 40 years there has been a reverberating appeal to recognize family engagement as a crucial part of a child's education. This appeal is due to consistent and robust research over time that has indicated positive effects of family engagement in a diverse range of families (Grolnick, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2015). In education, family engagement has been linked to improvement in academic achievement (Banerjee et al., 2011; Jeynes, 2012), motivation (Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005), and reduced dropout and truancy rates (McNeal, 1999) while improving attendance (Sheldon, 2007). Additionally, family engagement has been linked to improvements in a child's self-regulatory skills (Daniel et al., 2016) and increased self-esteem (Cripps & Zyromski, 2009). Teachers think similarly, believing that improving family engagement results in improved academic outcomes (Jeynes, 2012). Due to these positive outcomes, Reynolds et al. (2015) stated that family engagement has become a focused part of efforts over time to reform schools through policy and law enactment.

In special education, family engagement has also been shown to produce positive outcomes. Based on a report of the outcomes of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), which monitored in-school and post-school outcomes for nine years for students with disabilities, heightened family engagement was linked to higher grades (Newman, 2004). In this report, most families of students with disabilities were found to

be as engaged or more engaged than other families that did not have children with disabilities (Newman, 2004). Families of students with disabilities were found to provide a high level of homework support as well as having a high level of attendance at school meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school or class events (Newman, 2004).

Family engagement has also been found to improve post-school outcomes for students in special education (Hirano, Garbacz, Shanley, & Rowe, 2016). Family engagement and high expectations for future success were found to improve high school graduation (Doren et al., 2012), encouraged students to go on for postsecondary education (Chiang, Cheung, Hickson, Xiang, & Tsai, 2012), and be employed after graduation (Carter et al., 2012). In fact, students with disabilities whose families were engaged in their education, were 41 times more likely to go on to postsecondary education when compared to students whose families were not engaged (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Student post-graduation quality of life was also found to be associated with family engagement as evidenced by students with disabilities, reporting more often that they were enjoying their life after graduation (Papay & Bambara, 2014).

However, many families were found to engage in more passive types of family engagement such as regularly attending special education program planning and transition meetings (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012), but were minimally consulted during goal development for their children (Newman, 2004). Additionally, a decrease in family engagement was found for students with disabilities over time, as the students got older (Newman, 2004).

## **Current State of Family Engagement**

Researchers have found that families value education and involvement, plus want to help their children succeed by committing their time and resources (Epstein, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Murray et al., 2014). In addition, many families do not need encouragement to be engaged (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005); however, family engagement has been declining (Reynolds et al., 2015) which can be due to a variety of reasons. Stitt and Brooks (2014) felt that one reverberating philosophical reason was that the main social goal of education, dating back to the industrial era, was to lessen parental influence in order to promote uniformly educated workers. This philosophy continues to resonate in the ongoing lingering struggle to create full partnerships between schools and families (Stitt & Brooks, 2014). In addition, social scientists have attributed a recent decline in family involvement to changes in family roles and dynamics such as the increase in the pace of daily life and a need for both parents to work (Reynolds et al., 2015), resulting in families having less available time and energy to devote to their children's education. Furthermore, family engagement has been shown to decrease as the child becomes older and advances in grades (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Across ethnic groups and income levels, while CLD families have been found to want academic success for their children and value family involvement as well (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), they often face different types of obstacles to being involved in their children's education. Culturally and linguistically diverse families can encounter challenges such as language barriers (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012) or a cultural mismatch in educational expectations (Haynes, Phillips, & Goldring, 2010). They can also face uneven power dynamics with school personnel wielding greater power than

families (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012), which can be a universal challenge for all families. Motivational barriers also play a role in impacting CLD families' willingness to become engaged in the children's education such as not feeling welcomed or respected or not having their input or expertise valued (Shah, 2009).

A review of the literature revealed three studies that examined Latinx family motivation to become engaged in their children's education conducted by Shah (2009), Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis (2012) and Walker et al. (2011). While CLD families value education and family involvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), they engage less than White parents (Jeynes, 2012) which can be impacted by their level of education and income, but also by motivational barriers (Shah, 2009). Shah (2009) stated that while schools have minimal ability to change a family's education or income level, they can improve their ability to motivate families to become more engaged. Shah's (2009) study found that Latino families that were more connected to their communities were more involved in the children's education. Shah (2009) also found that Latinx families were more involved when they saw Latinx represented in the positions of power such as in governing and in the decision-making groups.

Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis (2012) found that Latinx families engaged more in the schools when they felt respected and their parental roles, aspirations, life experiences, and knowledge were valued. Latinx families in this study reported being more motivated to engage when they felt a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose as well as having opportunities for civic and other types of local participation (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012). Jasis and Ordoñez-Jasis' study found that a small group of Latinx families overcame their fears and organized their fellow migrant peers into an empowering group



focused on improving their children's education and life opportunities. School and Latinx family relationships improved when schools listened and deferred to the families' expertise and advice on their children's behavior and learning styles as well as their advice on how to reach out to the Latinx community (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012).

Walker et al. (2011) conducted a study on the ability of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler family engagement model to predict Latinx family involvement. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model examines the impact that influences and motivation have on a family's willingness to engage in their child's education (Walker et al., 2011) which is discussed more in depth later in this chapter. Walker et al.'s (2011) study found that Latinx family engagement occurred more often in the home than in the school, which may not be recognized by schools because schools define engagement more as the families' engagement that takes place at the school. They also found that specific invitations from their children and teachers played an important role in their motivation to engage, while personal beliefs about self-efficacy and roles in education as well as their education, time, and resources played a lesser role (Walker et al., 2011).

My research study's goal was to add to the little research, discussed previously, that exists on the motivation of Latinx families to engage in their children's education by specifically focusing on the motivation that influences a Spanish-speaking family to engage in order to support their children with a disability. Motivation in this study is defined using Epstein's (2010) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's family engagement models (Walker et al., 2011).

Epstein's model defines parent motivation as dependent on whether the school provides an environment that is positive, trusting, respectful, and caring. The Hoover-

Dempsey and Sandler model (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) defines motivation as two types of psychological processes or beliefs called role construction and sense of efficacy. Role construction is how the family defines their role and responsibilities in educating their child, and sense of efficacy is how the family views their own ability to support their child in his or her education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). In addition, the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model defines motivation as contextual, which includes the perception of being invited to engage and feeling welcomed by the school. The Epstein and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler models are discussed more in-depth further in this chapter.

### **Family Engagement Legal Guidance**

Support for family involvement in education has resulted in policy and legal mandates as legislators have tackled the issue of the role of families in the education of our nation's children, based on 50 years of research demonstrating the positive role of family involvement (Mapp, 2012). Evolving from the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Title 1, authorized as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was changed in 1968 to include language that highlighted a need for involvement of families in the education of their children (Mapp, 2012). In 1972, the importance of family involvement was strengthened when the General Education Provisions Act of 1969 was amended to include regulations that required states to create district parent advisory councils (Mapp, 2012).

In 1978, due to the agitation of parent advocacy groups, the Educational Amendments to ESEA was passed that gave families oversight powers on the development, execution, and assessment of educational programming at the state and

local level (Mapp, 2012). However, family involvement was weakened in 1981 when family involvement provisions were practically eradicated from Title I with the ESEA replacement, the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (Mapp, 2012). After many years of campaigning, family involvement made a comeback in 1994 when ESEA was reauthorized with a reform bill, the Improving America's Schools Act, that allocated funds to support the development of partnerships with families (Mapp, 2012; Reynolds et al., 2015).

In 2002, the reauthorization of Title 1 of ESEA, renamed No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), further strengthened family involvement through the allocation of funding to states and schools to be used to support “innovative and effective local family engagement initiatives” (Mapp, 2012, p. 2). Additionally, family involvement was defined, for the first time in NCLB, as “the participation of parents in a regular, two-way and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (as cited in Mapp, 2012, p. 13). Further definition described parents as full partners, having an essential and active role in their children's education as part of advisory committees and in decision-making (Mapp, 2012, p. 13). However, based on a 2008 report from the U.S. Department of Education, compliance with family involvement requirements was “one of the weakest areas of Title 1 compliance” (Mapp, 2012, p. 13).

More recently, in 2010, the conceptualization of family involvement evolved from families playing a minor role to being fully engaged and active partners with schools and their communities, sharing responsibility in children's education (Mapp, 2012). At that time, a change in terminology also occurred, moving from family *involvement* to *engagement* as a more comprehensive term to reflect this evolution in thinking (Mapp,

2012). However, enactment has not been easy to accomplish due to challenges such as an ongoing lack of focus on building partnerships with families, support for isolated family engagement activities instead of broad implementation, an emphasis on *compliance* instead of *improvement*, as well as restricted efforts to monitor and evaluate programming (Mapp, 2012).

No Child Left Behind was reauthorized in 2015 and renamed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which continued with support for family engagement (Henderson, 2016). Additions were made that included that school districts must “conduct outreach to all parents and family members” (as cited in Henderson, 2016, p. 2) as well as the requirement that district’s plans include “expectations and objectives for meaningful parent and family involvement” (as cited in Henderson, 2016, p. 2) through consultation and the establishment of parent advisory boards.

In special education, the IDEA (IDEA, 2004) recognized family engagement as an important component in the education of a child identified with a disability by providing for familial inclusion (Wolfe & Durán, 2013). The IDEA (2004) discussed family engagement in special education under the term *parental participation* which entails different activities during the special education evaluation, identification, and placement of a child as well as during program planning. MacLeod et al. (2017) described the family-school special education relationship well when they stated that “the letter and spirit of IDEA . . . envisions the family and school working together to create and enact shared education visions and goals for each child” (p. 382).

The Center for Parent Information and Resources, a website created by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs, summarized family

right of participation in special education as families having the right to attend any meeting that regards “the evaluation, identification, and educational placement of their child” (2010, May 3, para. 6) as well as any meeting that “relates to the provision of a free appropriate public education” (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2010, May 3, para. 6). Families also have the right to be a member of a team when decisions are being made, such as when determining if a child has a disability and qualifies for special education services (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2010, May 3). In addition, families have the right to be a member of the team that creates, reviews, and revises the IEP of their child and makes placement decisions (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2010, May 3).

Families who are not proficient English speakers might be placed at a disadvantage and may not be able to be active participants in their child’s education if they are not given access to all information, processes, and procedures detailed in a language that they can understand (Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009; Hee Lee et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; Park et al., 2001). Therefore, IDEA (2004) states that schools must ensure that families who are not proficient in English be able to participate in special education meetings, must be able to understand the proceedings, and be able to participate through the provision of interpreters. Schools must also provide written notice of all proceedings in a language that families can understand (IDEA, 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017).

When families who are not proficient in English are not active participants in the special education process, as outlined by IDEA (2004), and do not have a comprehensive understanding of special education laws, parent rights, and procedures, it becomes

questionable of their ability to provide what is termed *informed consent* as detailed in section 300.300 of IDEA. Therefore, it also becomes questionable that the spirit of IDEA's (2004) family-school collaboration is being fully met, indicating the presence of discriminatory practices unless appropriately remediated.

Since IDEA (2004) does not provide details on what entails family participation, it is important to explore what is meant by family participation in order to fully understand how and where difficulties occur for families who are not proficient in English. Family participation as termed under IDEA (2004) relates more to participation in decision-making and special education programming; however, exploring different theories and models of family engagement can be extrapolated to also include special education family engagement.

### **Models and Theory of Family Engagement**

In order to expand the conceptualization of family engagement, different research-based family engagement frameworks are explored in the next section which helps define what is family engagement. These frameworks can then be examined through the lens of cultural and linguistically diverse family engagement.

#### **Epstein's Spheres of Influence**

Epstein, starting in 1995, defined parental involvement in her theory on family engagement by describing the shared responsibilities occurring between families, schools, and communities that support the learning and development of children as overlapping *spheres of influence* (Epstein, 2010). Of note, Epstein made the distinction between the term *child* and *student*, pointing out that if schools think of their children as *students*, this term separates the family from the school's responsibility to educate the

child. However, if the school thinks of their students as *children*, teachers more easily view families and communities as partners in the education and development of the child (Epstein, 2010).

Epstein centered her theory on the child as the main actor in his or her own development and success with school-parent-community partnerships providing a framework of support and encouragement (2010). She felt that only by forging family, school, and community partnerships with shared interests and responsibilities, or overlapping spheres of influence, could children receive comprehensive support and opportunities in order to fully develop (Epstein, 2010). Epstein conceptualized these overlapping spheres of influence as having an external and internal model with some practices occurring separately and jointly (2010). The external model acknowledged that the child's development was influenced in the three contexts of family, school, and community, with experiences and influence occurring separately in each context (Epstein, 2010). The internal model acknowledged identified shared or overlapping practices and influences with some occurring at the institutional level such as school-wide activities or at the individual level such as parent-teacher conferences (Epstein, 2010).

In order to forge successful partnerships, Epstein recommended that schools create a *family-like* environment where each child is viewed as an individual with unique characteristics and families are welcomed (2010). She recommended that families create a *school-like* family where education is reinforced and valued. In addition, Epstein recommended that communities create not only *school-like* opportunities that featured events that supported education and student performance, but also *family-like*

environments where families could be strengthened through the provision of services and events.

Epstein created a framework of six different types of family engagement that has evolved over the years and in collaboration with other researchers (2010). The framework provides a roadmap for schools on how to develop a comprehensive family engagement program and include the following types

- Type 1: Parenting;
- Type 2: Communicating;
- Type 3: Volunteering;
- Type 4: Learning at Home;
- Type 5: Decision Making;
- Type 6: Collaborating with Community (Epstein, 2010).

Type 1, Parenting, is a type of engagement that assists all families in creating supportive home environments through suggestions, programs, family education, and home visits (Epstein, 2010). Type 2, Communicating, is a type of engagement that focuses on maintaining effective communication between the school and the family by offering newsletters, conferences, weekly or monthly folders of student work, phone calls, and clear information on school policies and programs (Epstein, 2010). Type 3, Volunteering, focus this type of engagement on how the schools can recruit and organize family help and support such as offering volunteer opportunities in the school and classroom (Epstein, 2010). Type 4, Learning at Home, fosters family engagement by schools providing information and ideas for families on how to best support homework and how to help children improve academic skills as well as offering family activities at



school and providing summer packets for academic practice (Epstein, 2010). Type 5, Decision Making, recommends that schools include families in decision-making and in developing family leaders by encouraging involvement in parent organizations, advisory boards, and in local and state elections (Epstein, 2010). Lastly, Type 6, Collaborating with Communities, guides schools to locate and incorporate different types of community resources and services that enhance student learning and development (Epstein, 2010).

Epstein noted that the underpinning of her theory is the concept of caring which relates to trust and respect (2010). Epstein felt that schools have two choices when considering family engagement, either create an environment where families are not equal partners in their child's education, which can lead to conflict and struggle, or commit to the creation of a comprehensive family engagement program, which can provide a positive, trusting, and respectful environment not only for school staff, but also families and children (Epstein, 2010).

The next model takes a different view and defines family engagement by what influences and motivates families to become engaged in their child's education. This expands Epstein's model by adding in the impact of psychological and contextual factors.

### **Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model**

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model of family engagement, based on psychological and contextual factors, was initially developed in 1995 and has evolved over time (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). Their model identified influences as well as motivational factors that result in families' decision to engage in their child's education (Green et al., 2007). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010) model provides three constructs that hypothesize why families become engaged which are based

on motivational beliefs and self-efficacy, perceptions of invitations for engagement, and family life context (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). This model is the most relevant to my study because it provides a framework that looks at influences and motivation which relates to my research questions.

The first psychological construct of engagement is based on motivational beliefs and self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model theorized that a family's child-rearing and child development beliefs influence their view on how much and what type of involvement they should have in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). These beliefs are also influenced by the families' recent experiences with school and their own previous schooling experiences as well as the influence of the beliefs of their social groups (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The families' beliefs and experiences are encompassed in what Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler called *role construction*, which dictates if the family believes they should be involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Families with an active role construction will be more engaged in their child's education, and those that hold a less active role construction will adversely be less involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

The family's beliefs of their own self-efficacy also impact their level of engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). When families believe that they have the ability to positively influence the educational outcomes for their child, they will be more engaged; however, when families do not believe that they have the ability to impact their child's education, they will not be motivated to be engaged (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Positive self-efficacy is developed through personal positive experiences in

educational engagement, by hearing of others' positive experiences, or by persuasion from others (Green et al., 2007).

The second construct of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model is engagement that is based on the social context of the family's perception of being invited to take part in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). These invitations can occur in three different manners such as general school invitations, specific teacher invitations, and specific child invitations (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). General school invitations encompass more than just invites to the school, but also if the school has a welcoming, respectful, and responsive climate that ensures families are well informed about requirements, events, and their child's academic progress (Green et al., 2007). Specific teacher invitations include how well the teacher provides frequent, explicit, and realistic recommendations on how families can support their child to succeed academically (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). While specific child invitations are direct requests from children for family help (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010).

The third construct of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model is engagement that is based on the family's perceptions of life context variables (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). Life context variables influence families not only if they should be engaged in their children's education, but also what they feel able to do (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). Life context variables include the skills and knowledge the family has that can be tapped as a resource to support their children during homework time. Other variables include if the family has the time and energy available to be engaged based on responsibilities and restraints (Green et al., 2007). Family culture and circumstances can also play a role in

life context variables that impact the ability of families to engage effectively and how they are able or choose to engage (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Walker et al. (2011) studied the ability of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model to predict Latinx families' involvement that found that Latinx families were actively engaged in their children's learning, but more at home, which may not align with the school's perception that active engagement is determined by families' presence in the school. Walker et al., (2011) also found that contextual motivators played an important role in Latinx family involvement such as specific invitations from the child and from teachers. While personal psychological motivators such as their beliefs and role in education and life context variables such as their time, education level, and resources were less influential on families' decisions to become involved (Walker et al., 2011).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model provides a manner for schools to define and identify areas to improve family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). However, as Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) stated, the power of this model lies in the amount of influence schools have on families' decisions on whether to engage or not. Schools can improve family engagement and student achievement by supporting their families' development of an active role construction and sense of self-efficacy in helping their children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Schools can also improve their climate, outreach, and interactions to improve school and teacher invitations as well as to adapt their outreach so that families, and particularly CLD families with different life contexts, can engage in a variety of manners (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Next, I explore a theory that explores the benefits of school and family interactions that can be incorporated into a comprehensive model of family engagement.

That theory is the social capital and social context theory.

### **Social Capital and Social Context Theory**

Hill and Taylor (2004) provided a socially based lens through which to define family engagement by considering two different processes: increasing *social capital* and *social control*. Hill and Taylor (2004) suggested that by interacting with teachers, families increased their *social capital* or their skills and knowledge about education. These gains in social capital improved families' ability to support their children (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Teachers also gain social capital when interacting with families by developing an understanding of the families' expectations, views and beliefs, and goals (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Children's school behaviors also improved when families and schools partnered together in holding the same expectations of appropriate behavior which Hill and Taylor (2004) called *social control*. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) found that children's competence, motivation to learn, and engagement in academics improved when they received consistent messaging from home and school on the importance of education and behavior expectations which supports Hill and Taylor's (2004) theory of social capital and social control.

### **Family Engagement and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families**

Some researchers have found that the conceptualization of family engagement may define engagement by what is valued from a mainstream cultural perspective or what Goldsmith and Robinson Kurpius (2018) called "traditional, White, middle-class

norms of parent involvement and expectations of educators” (p. 564). This conceptualization does not adequately reflect culturally diverse views and experiences, discounting what Auerbach (2007) called "culturally appropriate definitions and family-centered practices among diverse populations” (p. 253). Larrotta and Yamamura (2011) stated that common models and theories about family engagement make several assumptions that the families are familiar with the U.S. educational system, have time and resources to devote to their children’s education, and are based on a dated concept of a two-parent family who is fluent in English. These assumptions encourage deficit-based thinking about CLD families’ capacity to engage in their children’s education which contributes to inequalities in the education system. However, the family engagement models and theory discussed previously can be applied to CLD families with an asset-based view by understanding the family’s beliefs and background and then providing support so that CLD families can positively engage in the children’s education.

Epstein’s Spheres of Influence model illustrates the shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities in fostering a child’s development by encouraging schools to create an environment where families are equal partners in their child’s education (2010). This model is applicable to CLD families as well as who can benefit from parenting support, effective communication, volunteering, fostering learning at home, and being involved in decision-making (Epstein, 2010). However, CLD families need additional support to bridge potential cultural and language differences in order to achieve truly equal partnerships.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model illustrates the influences and motivation that can impact a family’s willingness to engage in their child’s education (Hoover-

Dempsey et al., 2005). Schools can improve the ability of culturally and linguistically diverse families to engage in their child's education by addressing the three factors of motivational beliefs and self-efficacy, perceptions of invitations for engagement, and family life context (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). By taking the time to not only understand a CLD family's motivational beliefs or how they view their role in their child's education but also how they view their own ability to support their child's education, schools can develop strategies to increase CLD family engagement. An active role and positive self-efficacy can be developed by providing positive experiences and opportunities for CLD families to learn how they can support their children. Schools can also improve CLD family engagement by analyzing their school environment to ensure it is welcoming to those who are diverse as well as ensuring they are providing clear communication on school requirements, events, and academic progress in a language that the family can understand. In addition, classroom teachers can improve CLD family engagement by providing specific information on how their child is progressing and recommendations on how the family can help their child through frequent communication with CLD families in a language they can understand.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model also directs schools to understand the life contexts of families which is the same for CLD families (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Only by understanding CLD families' lives and realities, can schools understand what time and resources families have available to devote to their children's education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Schools can offer flexible times for parent-conferences to accommodate family's work schedules and after-school support for families who may

have very limited time and resources to provide homework support for their children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Hill and Taylor's (2004) social capital and social control theory provides a lens to understand how increased family-school interactions and partnerships foster the increase in social capital for not only the family but also teachers. Culturally and linguistically diverse families gain social capital by having frequent interactions with school staff because they can learn school expectations, what the child is working on academically, the child's progress, and how they can support their child's education at home (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Teacher's gain social capital through frequent interactions with CLD families because they gain a better understanding of the family's beliefs and education background which helps teachers understand how to help families be active partners in their children's education (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Social control is also fostered through CLD family and teacher interactions when families and teachers communicate with each other and hold similar behavioral expectations for children (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Hill and Taylor's model supports child development through the development of consistent expectations and messaging from the CLD family and school (2004).

The models and theory discussed in this section can be applied to increase family engagement for CLD families by focusing on outreach that seeks to understand CLD families' beliefs and background. The three models together illustrate the importance of fostering a positive school environment, providing frequent and flexible opportunities for family-teacher interactions, effectively communicating with families, and actively listening to improve CLD families' ability to be actively engaged in their children's education (Epstein, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Schools can also increase CLD



family engagement by providing CLD families with opportunities to learn how to provide home support (Epstein, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Frequent school and family interactions, in turn, support the development of CLD families and teachers gaining in social capital and social control due to consistent educational and behavior expectations (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Applying the family engagement models and theory can support CLD families to improve their engagement. However, it is important to define barriers faced by CLD families in order to implement strategies to mitigate barriers.

### **Barriers to Family Engagement**

Family engagement is not an isolated occurrence because it takes place based on the community and cultural contexts and is influenced by SES, ethnicity, cultural background, and family characteristics (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Generally, higher family engagement has been found with those that have higher SES when compared to lower SES (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Low SES can create barriers that are related to lack of time and resources available for families to devote to their children's education due to economic challenges and stressors such as inflexible work schedules as well as lack of transportation and other resources (Benner et al., 2016; Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Researchers have found that lower SES families often have lower educational levels which may influence their self-efficacy or how well they can support their child, leading to less home-based and school-based support (Cheadle & Amato, 2011) and can also result in these families having reduced expectations for educational attainment for their children (Carolan & Wasserman, 2015; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Some researchers have found that lack of teacher invitation for engagement may be due to teachers

considering students' low achievement being the fault of their low SES families (Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Such views can be the result of teachers having negative perceptions about the effectiveness and abilities of low SES families to adequately support their children (Kim, 2009).

Culturally and linguistically diverse families face additional types of barriers due to their cultural and language differences (Wong & Hughes, 2006). Researchers have generally found that diverse families engage less in their children's education when compared to other families (Wong & Hughes, 2006). Teachers have reported limited family engagement with ethnically diverse families (Hill & Taylor, 2004), while both teachers and principals attributed diverse families limited engagement to lack of motivation, concern, and value of their children's education (Lopez et al., 2001).

Diverse families want to be engaged in their children's education but may not know how to become engaged in a way that is valued by the school (Barton et al., 2004). Wong and Hughes (2006) found that some diverse families believe that schools are responsible for initiating and creating opportunities for family engagement. English language proficiency can be a barrier for CLD families resulting in CLD families not feeling comfortable in engaging with the school because of limited understanding of what is being said (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system can also impede CLD family engagement because of not understanding educational philosophy nor parent expectations (Park & Holloway, 2013).

Narrowing the focus to Latinx families, these families have been found generally to be less engaged in their child's education due to cultural and linguistic factors (Goldsmith & Robinson Kurpius, 2018). Wong and Hughes (2006) reported that Latinx

Spanish-speaking parents had fewer communications with the school and less feeling of shared responsibility for their child's education than other diverse families that were mainly English-speaking. Cultural barriers are often faced by Latinx families because Latinx culture traditionally has high esteem for teachers, resulting in a lack of willingness to disagree and deferring to the teachers' opinion and expertise when making decisions about their child's education (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Zarate, 2007). In addition, Latinx families may lack the cultural capital or knowledge of the U.S. education system which leads to them feeling uncomfortable, not knowing how to navigate the system, or not understanding their role as a partner in the education of their child (Zarate, 2007).

Latinx families report caring about their children's education; however, they culturally define their role construction or roles and responsibilities differently (Auerbach, 2007). Latinx families provide support for their children by providing *consejos* or advice provided through cultural narratives and teaching while also engaging in discussions about goals for the future and supporting their children while doing homework (Auerbach, 2007; Ceballo et al., 2014). Culturally, Latinx families value strong family bonds or *la familia* which encompasses more than just relatives but the cultivation of strong relationships, commitment, and interdependence of the extended family which is a foundational support for their children (Durand & Perez, 2013). The concept of education or *educación* is also highly valued which is a broader description than the meaning in mainstream U.S. culture (Durand & Perez, 2013). In Latinx culture, *educación* is a broad description of home teachings that address manners, appropriate behavior, discipline, morals, and respect for elders (Durand & Perez, 2013).

In order to fully engage Latinx families in education, schools need to recognize and value the social and cultural capital that these families draw on when supporting their child's education (Goldsmith & Robinson Kurpius, 2018). Due to these cultural differences, Latinx families' engagement is often not visible, leading to teachers assuming that these families are not interested in being involved (Durand & Perez, 2013), while also not recognizing or understanding how Latinx families support their children in the home (Auerbach, 2007).

### **Barriers to Family Engagement in Special Education**

When CLD family engagement in special education is examined, similar themes emerge as discussed previously with additional identified barriers. One common theme reported by CLD families to researchers was their frustration and dissatisfaction related to language barriers and miscommunication (Hughes et al., 2002; Hughes, Valles-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2008). Lack of proficiency in English is an obvious barrier that can impede CLD families' ability to fully engage in the special education process and was a common issue found in many studies across cultural groups (Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009; Hee Lee et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; Park et al., 2001). In fact, one group of researchers stated that limited English proficiency was the biggest barrier that prevented CLD parents from forming good relationships with the school staff and could be why many CLD parents are perceived as being passive participants in the special education process (Lee & Park, 2016). Under the theme of linguistic barriers that impeded CLD parents in actively engaging in the special education process, subthemes emerge such as barriers due to lack of English proficiency (Hughes et al., 2002; Hughes et al., 2008), the overuse of medical jargon (Dinnesen, & Kroeger, 2018; Hughes et al.,

2002; Jegatheesan, 2009; Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004), the complex English language used in written special education documents (Jegatheesan, 2009), and issues with ill-prepared interpreters (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008).

Most of Latinx families in one study reported frustration with communication barriers due to their limited English (Hughes et al., 2002) which was found in another group of Latinx families who also felt disconnected due to their limited English skills (Hughes et al., 2008). Feelings of intimidation and confusion were reported by a group of Hispanic/Latinx families who also reported that special education meetings were difficult and emotionally charged which was exacerbated for these parents due to language barriers (Hardin et al., 2009). In addition to an overall language barrier reported by many CLD parents, the use of medical jargon by special education professionals further aggravated the language barrier (Dinnesen, & Kroeger, 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; Jegatheesan, 2009; Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004). The frequent use of specific medical vocabulary related to evaluation results and disabilities was reported by CLD families as being very difficult to understand and for interpreters to translate. In fact, Salas (2004) felt that the use of medical jargon in special education reflected an imbalance of social power, with such vocabulary used to specifically exclude parents from being able to fully participate.

The complex English language used in written documents given to CLD parents, such as procedural safeguards, was also reported to be very difficult to comprehend (Jegatheesan, 2009). Even if CLD parents had sufficient English skills, Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) reported that the parental procedural safeguards were written at an English reading level that may be too high for some CLD and even some English-

speaking parents, thus impeding some parents' ability to fully read and understand their parental rights and procedures. These findings were further validated by Gomez Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, and Acevedo-Garcia (2012). In addition, a group of Latinx mothers reported that the written materials were difficult to understand, even when provided in Spanish because many of them did not have a high level of literacy skills in Spanish (Shapiro, Monzó, Rueda, Gomez, & Blacher, 2004).

The IDEA (2004) indicates that schools need to provide interpreters so that limited English proficient parents can fully engage and participate in the special education process. However, CLD parents have reported dissatisfaction with the interpreter services provided to them (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008), while others reported that poor quality of interpretation impacted their ability to fully participate during meetings (Hart, Cheatham, & Jimenez-Silva, 2012). Furthermore, some CLD parents reported not knowing that they could request an interpreter or instances when an interpreter was not provided (Cummins & Hardin, 2017). When an interpreter was provided, some CLD parents reported that the interpreter did not have adequate background knowledge about special education, the specific vocabulary used, and/or did not have sufficient proficiency in English (Hughes et al., 2002; Lo, 2008). Culturally and linguistically diverse parents also reported fear of disclosing too much information to interpreters for fear that their personal information would not be kept confidential (Hughes et al., 2002; Jegatheesan, 2009; Lo, 2008).

Culturally and linguistically diverse parents also reported that interpreters often had difficulty keeping up with fast-moving conversations during special education meetings, resulting in these parents feeling like not all that was said was translated for

them (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008). One study of interpreters at educational meetings found that the education professionals spoke too much, not pausing to give the interpreters a chance to translate, which resulted in information not being conveyed to CLD parents (Lopez, 2000). The researcher in this study found that while interpreters could facilitate meetings, they were also found to be barriers to good communication between CLD parents and school staff, which impacted the creation of trusting relationships between the two groups (Lopez, 2000).

The system of special education in the U.S. places the family in the position of being an advocate for their children with disabilities (Cohen, 2014). Culturally and linguistically diverse families often have difficulties in being effective advocates because of a lack of understanding of the special education system in the U.S. as well as cultural and language barriers (Cohen, 2014). Latinx family dissatisfaction with special education services was found to often be the result of communication difficulties, not being aware or understanding of available services and supports, and a lack of understanding of their child's disability (Shapiro et al., 2004). Furthermore, CLD families reported feelings of discrimination, leading to a feeling of exclusion accompanied by a feeling of being the only one to advocate for their child, which was termed by Shapiro et al. (2004) as *alienated advocacy*.

Family engagement for CLD families can be impacted by various factors. Low SES can impact a CLD family's available time and resources to devote to their child's education (Benner et al., 2016; Hill & Taylor, 2004), and low educational levels may lead to less home and school support (Cheadle & Amato, 2011). Culturally and linguistically diverse families' low educational levels can also lead to reduced educational attainment

expectations for their child (Carolan & Wasserman, 2015; Hill & Taylor, 2004). In addition, negative teacher perceptions can influence CLD families' ability to engage in their child's education (Kim, 2009; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007). Compounding these factors are additional barriers due to cultural and language differences which can lead to less engagement than other families (Wong & Hughes, 2006) because CLD families may not understand how to engage in a way that is valued by the school (Barton et al., 2004). Furthermore, limited English proficiency can impact a CLD family's ability to understand what teachers are telling them (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010) and unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system can lead to limited family engagement (Park & Holloway, 2013).

Latinx families can face these described barriers as well and are found to be less engaged (Goldsmith & Robinson Kurpius, 2018), despite placing a high value on education in a broader term that is traditionally held in mainstream U.S. culture that includes appropriate manners, behavior, morals, and respect for elders (Durand & Perez, 2013). Latinx culture traditionally holds teachers in high esteem and are not willing to disagree, preferring to defer to the teacher's opinion and expertise (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Zarate, 2007), while also feeling the school is primarily responsible for their child's education (Wong & Hughes, 2006), which can make Latinx families appear more passive (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Zarate, 2007). Furthermore, Latinx families support their child in manners that schools may not realize by providing strong family relationships and advice in cultural narratives (Durand & Perez, 2013).

In special education, CLD families report feeling frustrated and dissatisfied with the special education process due to limited English proficiency (Hughes et al., 2002;



Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2008) which has been found by researchers to be the biggest barrier to effective family-special education partnerships (Lee & Park, 2016). When all the possible barriers for CLD as well as Latinx families are considered, not being able to be full and active participants in special education decision making and programming calls into question the IDEA (2004) mandate of family participation.

There are many barriers that CLD families can encounter when attempting to engage in their child's education as well as his/her special education program. In the next section, recommendations to improve CLD families' engagement are explored which provides a framework to improve family engagement.

### **Recommendations to Improve Family Engagement for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families**

Since family engagement is so important for a child's academic success, it is essential for special education professionals to be mindful on how to create and sustain effective relationships with their CLD families. In this section, culturally responsive practices, as well as characteristics of collaborative relationships, are explored in order to provide some insights on how to improve CLD family engagement.

#### **Culturally Responsive Practices**

One way to improve special education and family collaborative relationships is by adhering to culturally responsive practices, thus improving outcomes for CLD students (Harry, 2008). According to SEDL, formerly known as the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) and the Education Development Center (Lavorgna, 2016), five key culturally responsive practices that support family engagement are discussed in this section which include: (a) focusing on creating and supporting home and school

relationships; (b) supporting existing familial knowledge; (c) distinguishing and employing what works for families; (d) promoting cultural awareness; and (e) by developing intellectual, social, and human capital for both families and schools.

Culturally responsive practices require thoughtful individualization for CLD families, just as special education teachers do for their students, looking at specific family strengths, needs, and experiences (Rossetti et al., 2017). Cultural awareness can be fostered by special education professionals through careful self-reflection and improvement of culturally responsive practices as professionals become more aware of how culture influences their own life and others (Rossetti et al., 2017).

Besides examination of cultural responsiveness, by practicing what is termed *cultural humility* (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013, p. 354), special education professionals can avoid assumptions that one's own beliefs, values, and views are superior by being open to new beliefs, values, and views. This openness leads to a better understanding of CLD families' experiences and their perspectives which helps to identify common goals (Diken, 2006; Lee & Park, 2016). In order to gain further understanding of CLD families, special education professionals need to gather as much information as possible on their CLD families by not only interviewing the families, but also by seeking out others who are knowledgeable about the families' culture and language such as fellow professionals, cultural liaisons, interpreters, and community resources (Francis, Haines, & Nagro, 2017; Langdon, 2009; Rossetti et al., 2017).

### **Collaborative Partnerships**

In order to improve CLD family participation and engagement in the special education process, the five key practices of culturally responsive practices can be

combined with six identified indicators of successful collaborative partnerships between families of children with disabilities and school professionals which help counteract negative social conditions (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). The six indicators of successful collaborative partnerships include communication, commitment, equality, professional competence, mutual trust, and mutual respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017).

A combination of culturally responsive practices and collaborative partnership indicators supports family engagement in the special education process. Without CLD family engagement in the special education process, family goals and CLD children's cultural and linguistic strengths and differences may not be recognized, resulting in CLD children potentially being incorrectly diagnosed with a disability and/or receiving a poor or inadequate special education program (Harry, 2008).

The six indicators of successful collaborative partnerships which can be applied to improve CLD family engagement are discussed next with communication being the first and most important indicator because communication directly impacts the remaining indicators of commitment, equality, professional competence, mutual trust, and mutual respect.

**Communication.** Frequent, open, and honest communication has been identified by families of children with disabilities as a foundational component of effective collaborative family-school relationships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Families have reported that they value frequent as well as open and honest, but tactful, communication that also provides positive comments paired with comments on their child's challenges. In addition, families recommended that discussions use language that is clear with no use

of jargon and that special education professionals practice the art of careful nonjudgmental listening (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

**Commitment.** The idea of commitment in collaborative partnerships indicates a need for special educators to demonstrate dedication to families and their children by demonstrating through statements and actions that these families are valued and the importance of their school-family relationship (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). This is accomplished by school staff proving to families that they are constantly focused on the child's best interests by maintaining high expectations (Rossetti et al., 2017) and by giving the extra attention, time, and work needed to ensure the child and families' needs are met (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). In addition, staff needs to consistently communicate, not only the child's progress, focusing on positive experiences as well as challenges, but furthermore help the families advocate for other needed services (Rossetti et al., 2017).

**Equality.** Families have indicated that a successful special education staff and family relationship requires equality as indicated by a harmonious relationship between the two parties (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). To ensure equality in the special education process, educational professionals need to take the time to not only listen and acknowledge the families' point of view, their strengths, and expertise, but also take steps to provide ample opportunities for family participation (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Equality at a special education meeting has been described by families as having a special education team where everyone feels comfortable contributing, including themselves (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

**Professional Competence.** Families, including CLD families, need to feel confident that the educational professionals serving their children are competent and that their children's needs are well understood as evidenced by individualized instruction (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Holding high expectations also can be part of professional competence (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). In addition, families also admire special educators who are always willing to learn new things and strive to keep themselves updated (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). In the area of professional competence, special educators include the ability of team members to take a whole-child and whole-family approach, focusing on how to provide comprehensive support for both the child and family, not just focusing on isolated aspects (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

**Mutual Trust.** The concept of trust, a critical component in family-school collaborative relationships encompasses a feeling of reliability, safety, and discretion (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Trust is created through the demonstration of reliability such as special educators following through on promises and actions they have made to families. Trust is also fostered through reassurance of the safety of families' children plus is demonstrated in dignified interactions with families and children (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Furthermore, trust is fostered when families feel the special education staff maintain their confidence and confidentiality (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017).

**Mutual Respect.** Mutual respect is also a critical component of family-school collaborative partnerships such as partnerships that occur during the special education process (Haines, Gross, Blue-Banning, Francis, & Turnbull, 2015). Respect has been defined by CLD families as special educators demonstrating value for their children such

as talking about them as a person, not a disability label (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Culturally and linguistically diverse families have also defined respect as special education staff demonstrating courtesy by calling them by their last name, asking permission to use their first name, being on time for meetings, and valuing parents' support of their children (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Special education professionals have added another component to respect to include being nonjudgmental towards families with different backgrounds and lifestyles (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

### **Overlaying Culturally Responsive Practices**

The five culturally responsive practices discussed earlier that include focusing on creating and supporting school-home relationships, supporting existing parental knowledge, distinguishing and employing what works for families, promoting cultural awareness, and developing intellectual, social, and human capital for both parents and schools (Harry, 2008), are supported by the six indicators of successful collaborative partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Fostering school-home relationships is further supported through all six collaborative practices of communication, commitment, equality, professional competence, mutual trust, and mutual respect. Reinforcing existing familial knowledge is supported through the practice of communication and equality. The collaborative practices of communication, equality, professional competence, and mutual respect foster the culturally responsive practice of distinguishing and employing what works for families as well as promote cultural awareness. Furthermore, the development of intellectual, social, and human capital occurs when all six collaborative practices are in place.

## Conclusion

The number of racially diverse students in public schools is increasing as well as those identified as an EL (NCES, 2018). The largest number of ELs are identified as Hispanic (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017) with Spanish as their home language (McFarland, 2016). English learners demonstrate a consistent achievement gap in reading and math (Murphey, 2014), with ELs retained more often (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service, 2016) and graduating at lower rates when compared to other students (Sanchez, 2017).

One avenue to improve academic outcomes for ELs is in the area of family engagement which plays a significant role in improving student academic achievement in general education and special education (Banerjee et al., 2011; Jeynes, 2012; Newman, 2004). The IDEA (2004) recognized the importance of family engagement and mandated family participation, their terminology for family engagement, in special education decision making and program planning (Wolfe & Durán, 2013) with accompanying family rights (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2010).

The Epstein family engagement model and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model illustrate how to improve overall family engagement as well as CLD family engagement by promoting a positive school environment, effectively communicating, and offering numerous opportunities for family-teacher interactions that are accommodating to their schedules and needs (Epstein, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Additionally, through frequent school-teacher interactions, CLD families and teachers gain in social capital and social control (Hill & Taylor, 2004).

While diverse families want to engage in their child's education, they may not engage in a manner that is recognized or valued by the school (Barton et al., 2004). Culturally and linguistically diverse families can encounter various barriers to impact their ability to engage in their child's education due to their cultural and language differences (Park & Holloway, 2013; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Latinx families specifically are also less engaged due to cultural and linguistic factors (Goldsmith & Robinson Kurpius, 2018). In addition, Latinx families may define their roles and responsibilities for their child's education differently than the school (Auerbach, 2007).

Motivational barriers also play a role in impacting CLD families' willingness to become engaged in the children's education (Shah, 2009). While income and education can influence a CLD family's engagement in their child's education, schools have little control over those factors, but can improve CLD families' motivation to become engaged (Shah, 2009).

While barriers exist for CLD families to fully engage in their child's education as well as fully participate in special education decision making and program planning, CLD family engagement can be fostered through the use of culturally responsive practices in tandem with indicators of collaborative partnerships which, in turn, can positively impact CLD families motivation. Improving CLD families' engagement in special education by increasing their motivation to become engaged cannot only improve academic outcomes, but also helps schools ensure they are meeting IDEA (2004) mandates of family participation.



## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODS

#### **Introduction**

I am a bilingual speech-language pathologist who has worked with Spanish-speaking students and families for 20 years. During this time, I have attended approximately 75 special education meetings each year and have witnessed the barriers that Spanish-speaking families encounter in the special education process. Because of this, I have worked to train district special education staff on how to improve access for these families. I have also provided training and counseling for Spanish-speaking families so that they can understand the special education process and actively participate and engage in their child's special education decision-making and program planning. My experiences with Spanish-speaking families inspired this study with hopes of improving access to special education for diverse families.

The number of students who are ELs is increasing in U.S. public schools (NCES, 2018). These students demonstrate achievement gaps related to various factors such as limited English proficiency as well as inadequate teacher preparation to accommodate their English learning needs (Burr et al., 2015). Research indicates that ELs are also overrepresented in special education, most likely due to a misunderstanding of how learning English as a second language impacts academic achievement (Burr et al., 2015).

One proven method to improve EL academic achievement is by increasing family engagement (Banerjee et al., 2011); however, CLD families, as well as Latinx families,

engage less than White families in the education of their children (Wong & Hughes, 2006). Culturally and linguistically diverse family engagement can be impeded by cultural and language difference barriers (Cummins & Hardin, 2017) with limited English proficiency identified as the biggest barrier (Lee & Park, 2016). In addition to cultural and language barriers, motivational barriers can also impact CLD families' engagement (Shah, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the motivation of Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities to engage in their child's education. This study added to the limited understanding of CLD families' motivation to engage in their child's education. The common characteristics and motivation of a group of Spanish-speaking families that choose to engage with a family support group were explored. The results were then compared to family engagement models and recommendations to improve CLD family engagement. Spanish-speaking families' input was sought through two focus groups and four individual interviews, augmented by an observation and journaling during the process.

### **Research Questions**

To better understand the motivation of Spanish-speaking Latinx families to engage in their child's education the following research questions were posed:

- Q1 What are the common characteristics of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability and choose to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q2 What are the motivations of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q3 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current models of family engagement?

- Q4 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current recommendations that enhance diverse parental/familiar participation in education?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Qualitative research is conducted in a manner that is based on different theoretical perspectives or approaches (Merriam, 2009). As described in Chapter I, the goal of critical research is to understand and transform a social phenomenon through the examination of existing power dynamics, focusing on the context or system and less on the individuals (Merriam, 2009). Using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective allows the researcher to examine inequities in education that are due to persistent race disparities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) by examining the experiences of people of color in order to understand oppression in the educational system (Ladson-Billings, 1999).

Critical Race Theory evolved in the 1970s from the intersection of critical research and reactions in the legal field to persistent civil rights issues, illustrating power imbalances, between White and Black people, by examining who has power based on race and racism (Martinez, 2014; Yosso, 2005). Malagon, Perez Huber, and Velez (2009) describe CRT as being “deeply committed to a pursuit of social justice by affording its users a theoretical tool to eliminate racism as a broader effort to end subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin” (p. 255). This is accomplished by looking at a phenomenon from the perspectives of people of color, framing research through five methodological views of:

- the conjunction of race, racism, and subordination;
- the questioning of current race ideology;
- the dedication towards social justice;

- the importance of lived experiences;
- the use of transdisciplinary knowledge (Malagon et al., 2009, p. 256-257).

In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate suggested that researchers use a CRT perspective to examine inequities in education resulting from persistent race disparities. Ladson-Billings (1999) further proposed to examine the experiences of people of color, a common tenet of CRT, in order to understand oppression in the educational system. Solorzano and Yosso (2001) further expounded on the application of CRT in education, stating that the CRT “challenges the traditional claims the educational system and its institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (p. 472) because they “act as a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society” (pp. 472-473). More recently, Dixson, and Rousseau Anderson (2018) provided guidance when applying CRT to research in the field of education by suggesting:

- achievement which is based on competition results in racial inequity;
- examination of educational policy and practices is needed to determine racial inequality;
- questioning the validity of applying white cultural and language norms to all students;

- seeking improvement of racial inequities through documentation of inequities and advocacy (p.122).

Further developments in CRT resulted in subgroups such as Malagon et al.'s (2009) Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) which has a narrower focus on how experiences of Latinx are affected by different types of oppression based on language, culture, ethnicity, and immigration status. Yosso (2005) added an additional perspective by expanding CRT's challenges to deficit thinking, proposing a need to consider people of color's cultural wealth which is based on the "empowering potential" (p. 76) of knowledge gained in the home and through community experiences. Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth concept was inspired by the work of Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) who developed the concept of *funds of knowledge* which is knowledge that a child acquires in the home based on the family's cultural practices, knowledge, and expertise. Yosso (2005) stated that through a CRT perspective, a researcher can illustrate how communities of color foster six types of empowering cultural wealth which include: (1) aspirational, (2) navigational, (3) social, (4) linguistic, (5) familial, and (6) resistant capital types of wealth.

Yosso (2005) described aspirational capital as a type of resiliency defined by "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). According to Yosso, linguistic capital refers to the intellectual, communication, and social benefits resulting from using one or more languages. Another form of cultural wealth, according to Yosso, is familial capital nurtures commitment to the welfare of the cultural community as well as expands the

idea of a family to extended family, present and past, while also fostering caring and support within the community or family.

Additional areas of wealth proposed by Yosso (2005) include social capital, an extension of familial capital, represented by the types of social networks and community resources available to support the family. Other forms of Yosso's cultural wealth includes resiliency and navigational capital, which enables the family to successfully navigate unfamiliar social institutions using inner resources as well as their social networks and cultural strategies. Yosso also identified cultural wealth as resistant capital which is conceptualized as positive behaviors that are fostered within a family or cultural group that are in opposition to experienced inequalities, thus challenging the status quo. Resistance capital includes family behaviors such as teaching children to value themselves despite receiving devaluing messages from mainstream culture.

Applying a LatCrit lens over CRT directed the focus of this study to target the inequities experienced by Latinxs based on language, culture, ethnicity, and immigration status (Malagon et al., 2009). Overlaying Yosso's (2005) asset-based conceptualization of cultural wealth with CRT and LatCrit theories adds the consideration that people of color possess unacknowledged cultural wealth resulting from knowledge gained in the home and through community experiences.

### **Research Genre**

As mentioned before, the purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the motivation of Spanish-speaking families to engage in a family support group using a phenomenological approach. According to Merriam (2009), a phenomenological approach focuses on the shared experiences of a particular group and their interpretation

of those experiences. In the case of this study, the focus was on the shared experiences of Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities and who choose to participate in a family support group. Two focus groups and four individual interviews were used for this qualitative study to understand these families' experiences because these two methods, according to Morgan (2019), complement each other by providing insights obtained in different social settings. Additionally, interviews provide a way to discover what people are thinking or what meaning they attach to a situation (Patton, 2002). Therefore, interviews done in groups and individually were selected as the data collection method.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

My research questions targeted a specific group of participants, Spanish-speaking families who have a child identified with a disability. For my study, I selected inclusion criteria for participants that: (a) were Spanish-speaking, (b) had a child identified with a disability, and (c) attended a Spanish-speaking family support group. Attendance was defined as attending 1 or more times out of a possible 12 meetings per year and was validated by the family support group facilitator. I had initially defined attendance as attending more than 6 meetings per year; however, due to participant recruitment difficulties, I had to expand it to include families who had attended just 1 or more meetings in one year.

In order to ensure participants met my inclusion criteria and to collect basic demographic information, participants were initially asked to fill out a short questionnaire (Appendix A) that collected information such as gender, home language, level of English

proficiency, if they have a child identified with a disability, the age of the child, the type of special education programming the child is receiving, and how often the participant attends the Spanish-speaking family support group. Immigration status, occupation, and age were not collected in order to not cause distrust in my research as a means to identify families in order to negatively impact a family's ability to live in the United States because some families may not have appropriate visas to be in the United States.

**Recruitment.** Participants were recruited from a Spanish-speaking family support group, which is not identified in this study in order to maintain confidentiality. The support group is organized and facilitated by a non-profit organization in a large mid-Western city and provides support to families that have children with disabilities. The mission of the group is to empower families and children with disabilities through information sharing and training. The group holds monthly meetings and hosts social events as well as conferences.

I initially contacted the family support group by email and after ensuring my attendance was welcomed by the group facilitator (Appendix B), I attended four group meetings before I started data collection and continued to attend the group meetings after I started data collection. In total, I attended eight group meetings between January and December of 2019 in order to understand the group dynamics and in order to become familiar to the families. I was introduced by the facilitator as a researcher and as a bilingual speech-language pathologist with many years of experience working with Spanish-speaking children with disabilities. I was able to immediately begin to establish rapport with the group because at the first meeting that I attended, prior to data collection, I was asked to address families' special education questions. At that time, I responded to



individual questions and discussed the least restrictive environment, limited available special education services at a charter school, and funding issues in the state of Colorado.

I had another opportunity to establish rapport at the second meeting when I helped facilitate the group completing a questionnaire from a state agency, and at the third meeting, I served as the interpreter for the city recreation program manager who was announcing summer programs available for families that had children with disabilities.

Once I established that the group would be open to being participants in my research study and had the experiences that I was seeking, I frequently attended their monthly meetings in order to be viewed as a supporter of the group and to enhance the families' comfort with my presence. I participated in group discussions when it was appropriate to give my input and interacted socially with families. I also helped with other group tasks such as organizing refreshments, handing out forms, and cleaning up after each meeting. Additionally, I helped register participants at the group's yearly conference and helped families in making a Christmas wreath at the December meeting.

Participants were recruited either in person during the monthly support group meeting or through individual recruitment by a co-facilitator. The group was informed verbally and in writing that the study would occur in two phases, with focus groups first and then individual interviews second. Eleven participants were recruited for the focus groups, and 4 individuals who were part of the focus groups were interviewed individually. Details on focus groups and interview participant selection is discussed further in this chapter. The email from the family support group that indicates their willingness to let me recruit participants from their group can be found in Appendix B.

**Purposeful sampling.** In qualitative research, purposeful sampling is often employed because the researcher can only gain an understanding of a specific phenomenon by selecting individuals who have experience with that phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling, a commonly used qualitative technique, not only seeks out individuals who have specific knowledge and experience, but who are also available and willing to participate (Bernard, 2002). Patton (2015) attributes the power of purposeful sampling in obtaining rich information from a selected group that provides profound insights and understanding of a phenomenon.

Homogeneous purposeful sampling is one type of purposeful sampling used to “describe a particular subgroup in depth, to reduce variation, simplify analysis, and facilitate group interviewing” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 17). Homogeneous groupings are also supported by the concept called *common ground* which is the way participants use common roles and identities as the foundation of their conversations (Morgan, 2019). When participants have common ground, theoretically, they have a mutual understanding and will engage more freely in conversation (Clark, 2006). Higher engagement occurs when participants feel that others in the group will understand what they are saying and will accept differing viewpoints because participants share similar experiences (Morgan, 2019). This type of group relationship promotes sharing and comparison of their perspectives, making it easier to engage group members in a conversation (Hydén & Bülow, 2003) and results in the collection of rich, detailed information (Patton, 2002).

Homogeneous purposeful sampling allowed me to select participants who had similar linguistic backgrounds as well as similar experiences with special education. For my study, I selected inclusion criteria for participants that: (a) were Spanish-speaking, (b)

had a child identified with a disability, and (c) attended a family support group. These inclusion criteria made my selection of participants deliberate or purposeful. By selecting homogeneous purposeful sampling, I solicited participants from a Spanish-speaking family support group who have common ground due to their experience with the phenomenon of the special education process and programming because these families had children identified with a disability and had been involved in the special education process at either the early intervention, preschool, elementary or secondary school level. I had difficulty in recruiting participants for the focus groups even with support from one of the group's facilitators, which is detailed further in the Focus Group section.

**Demographics.** The demographics data indicated that all participants were parents, including 8 mothers and 3 fathers, for a total of 11. The data are illustrated in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1

*Demographics of Participants*

Participant/ gender	Pseudonym	Primary Home Language	English Proficiency	Child's Disability	Age of Child	Attend Family Support Group
1/female	Mariana	Spanish	None	Autism	9	2 times
2/female	Girasol	Spanish	Very little	Trisomy 2.1	5	4 years
3/female	Sandy	Spanish	30%	Autism;	13	8 years
4/male	Xavi	Spanish	10-20%	Hydrocephaly Autism	4	1 year
5/female	Rebecca	English and Spanish	Good	Autism	5	1 time
6/female	Beck	Spanish	90% understanding; 40-50% speaking ability	Autism; ADHD; Anxiety	15	Several years
7/male	David	Spanish	Little	Down Syndrome	2	1 year
8/male	Kokis	Spanish	More or less	TBI	Teenager	Several years
9/female	Gloria	Spanish	Almost none	Down syndrome	16	Many years
10/female	Aventurera	Spanish	Understands; little speaking ability	Down syndrome; Autism	16	8 months
11/female	Lizeth	Spanish	90%	Down syndrome	6	Several years

*Note.* Explanation of acronyms: ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder); TBI (traumatic brain injury).

Ten parents reported Spanish as their primary home language, and 1 reported Spanish and English as the home language. In the area of English proficiency, 6 parents reported none to limited ability, incorporating those parents who reported 30% proficiency or less, or used qualifies such as “more or less,” “almost none,” “none,” “little,” or “very little.” Five parents reported moderate to good ability, incorporating parents who reported 40-50% proficiency, 90% proficiency, or used the qualified “good.”

All 11 parents had children with disabilities, ranging from 2 to 16 years of age, with most of the children having autism spectrum disorder and/or Down syndrome. Nine parents had experiences with some type of special education services through the public schools, with 2 having experiences only with early intervention services. In addition, 2 parents had attended at least one family support group meeting, while the majority had attended for one or more years. Data such as age, occupation, country of origin or immigration status were not collected in order to not cause distrust among participants regarding my research study's purposes since some families may be in the United States without the correct visas.

### **Data Collection**

**Institutional Review Board approval.** Before I started data collection, I sought Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Northern Colorado. My study qualified as an Exempt Review Procedure since I conducted research with individuals using interviews. The IRB application provided information on the purpose, the methods, potential risks for participants, safeguards for participant informed consent, and assurance of confidentiality. After obtaining IRB approval, all ethical standards were maintained throughout the study. A copy of the IRB approval letter is included in Appendix C.

**Research role and stance.** One of the characteristics of qualitative research is the role of the researcher as the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). Benefits of using the researcher as the main data collection instrument are that the researcher can be "immediately responsive and adaptive" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15) as well as being able to enhance understanding with not only

verbal but also nonverbal communication. Additional benefits include the researcher's ability to immediately process incoming information or data such as being able to "clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for the accuracy of interpretation, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15).

In a focus group study, the researcher may take on the role of the moderator with the main responsibility of facilitating the conversation (Morgan, 2019). Krueger and Casey (2015) stated that the most critical characteristic of the moderator is the ability to convey respect by demonstrating the belief that participants have something valuable to contribute to the discussion. A good moderator is an active listener, is nonjudgmental, and responds positively to participation while not showing agreement or disagreement with specific responses (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 2019). The art of being a good moderator lies in the ability to allow the conversation to develop naturally between the participants while also providing probing questions to keep the conversation going (Morgan, 2019).

An additional factor that needs to be considered when conducting a focus group or individual interviews with culturally and linguistically diverse families is to be conscious of cultural differences between the moderator and the group as well as potential language barriers (Morgan, 2019). In order for the moderator to be successful, he or she must have a good understanding of the group's culture such as being aware of the group's beliefs and practices (Morgan, 2019). Other factors to consider are the selection of a neutral setting and the provision of refreshments. Partaking of food that is preferred by a select culture in a social situation can impart a feeling of comfort which enhances participants' willingness to engage in conversation (Morgan, 2019).

In my role as the researcher and focus group moderator in this study, I brought 20 years of experience as a member and facilitator of various transdisciplinary special education teams with extensive experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse children and their families. Over the years, I have come to know many Latinx families who have children with a disability and have strived to overcome barriers in order to support them to be active team members in identifying a disability in their child and in creating a yearly education plan that meets the particular needs of their child. Through these experiences, I have practiced being a good listener, being nonjudgmental, and responding positively to family and other team members' participation and input. I have also had ample opportunity to be the special education meeting facilitator, allowing for a natural discussion between team members while also keeping the meeting agenda moving forward. I have dedicated my career to advocating for CLD families who, as I have witnessed, are not provided equal access to the special education programming for their child with a disability due to various barriers. Therefore, I am dedicated to bringing the voices of CLD families forward in this research study.

My background provides me with further personal experience and a lens which enables me to recognize and understand cultural and language differences. I am a first-generation American citizen, experiencing some cultural differences in my upbringing when compared to typical mainstream U.S. children. While my family assimilated easily into U.S. culture, there were slight differences such as how holidays were celebrated and foods that we ate. In addition, my parents often spoke in Spanish with each other but English with myself and my siblings because they wanted us to be raised with English as our first language. I also lived in Venezuela for several years as a teenager, after growing

up in the U.S., giving me the experience of struggling to assimilate and communicate when I was culturally and linguistically different from the majority of the population.

During my years in Venezuela, I learned to speak Spanish and when I came back to the U.S., I continued to improve my Spanish skills by taking courses in college. When I went into the field of Speech-Language Pathology, I was frequently asked to work with Spanish-speaking adults and children which gave me additional daily opportunities to practice and improve my Spanish skills. I also attended a two-week intensive advanced Spanish class in Costa Rica in 2009 and had a Spanish tutor for two years between 2016 and 2018 to work on maintenance and improvement of my Spanish skills. Through these years of experiences and efforts, I reached a level of Spanish proficiency that enabled me to feel competent to evaluate children in Spanish and serve as an interpreter at special education meetings.

My professional and personal cross-cultural experiences and Spanish language proficiency allowed me to conduct focus groups and interviews in Spanish for this study with awareness and sensitivity to cultural and language differences. I also provided culturally appropriate refreshments and selected a neutral site to conduct the focus groups and interviews such as the local hospital where the group meets or at a local community meeting room.

**Use of key informants.** Additional cultural and language considerations are to ensure that the participants are provided culturally sensitive opportunities to fully understand what is involved in the research study in order to give informed consent (Morgan, 2019). Recruitment of participants must also be done in a manner that is culturally acceptable (Morgan, 2019). Morgan recommended seeking input from key



informants in order to address any cultural or language differences. Payne and Payne (2004) defined key informants as individuals who have particular familiarity with a group of individuals and can be used as a resource for their authoritative knowledge. Morgan defined key informants as “experts who can provide crucial advice” (p. 21) regarding the “extent of their knowledge about a topic in questions and their awareness of how these issues play out in group settings (p. 21).

In the case of this research study, the family support group facilitator was consulted as a key informant since he is familiar with the families and how the group interacts during discussions. The participants were recruited with the support of the group facilitator during face-to-face meetings as well as by individual facilitator recruitment by another co-facilitator.

**Establishing rapport.** Before starting my research study, I took the time to establish rapport with the family support group by attending their monthly meeting four times, between January and May of 2019, assisting with tasks, and having conversations with various families. For example, I helped families fill out a survey questionnaire, recorded their personal responses for a survey, and was the interpreter for the discussion about adaptive sports opportunities in the area. In addition, I spoke about my role as a speech language pathologist and answered the families’ questions that related to the provision of special education services, funding, eligibility, and the amount of time their children spent in the general education classroom. Later, I also volunteered to assist during the group’s yearly conference in October and helped man the check-in desk.

Taking this time to build relationships with the group supported my role as the moderator and researcher because my demonstrated interest aided in facilitating open

discussions during focus groups and interviews. My years of experience in special education, cross-cultural experiences, bilingual skills, and fostering a relationship with the family group helped me provide a climate during my interactions that helped families feel more comfortable speaking openly and honestly during focus group and individual conversations.

**Researcher bias.** A critical aspect that the researcher needs to consider when he or she is the main research instrument is the researcher's own biases. Researcher bias can impact the data collection and analysis, indicating a need for the researcher to acknowledge and continuously monitor the impact of biases during the research process (Merriam, 2009). My own personal biases that I brought to this research study were based on my experiences working with CLD families. I have witnessed as well as have experienced implicit bias towards these families which is due to misunderstandings or cultural disconnect with families because special educators believe their specialized knowledge and training enables them to know what is best for a child with a disability, thus, often discounting family input, beliefs, or opinions.

Additional personal biases arose from my experiences where I have found that many educators do not understand nor realize how they create barriers for CLD families through their use of specialized vocabulary and complex language, rushing through important evaluation results and legal documents, or putting the families in the role of being a listener and to agree with the special education team's decisions. Another personal bias that I brought to this study was that I understand the financial restraints, legal requirements, and work-related responsibilities that cause special education teachers and providers to be overwhelmed with strained resources, resulting in rushed meetings

and not always being able to provide optimal special education programming for individual children.

In order to account for my biases, I continuously monitored and accounted for their potential impact on how I collected and analyzed the data. Ortlipp (2008) suggested reflective journaling as a method to make transparent the researcher's experiences, thoughts, feelings, and opinions which when accompanied by critical self-reflection provides rigor in a research study's methodology and analysis. In order to account for and process my own potential biases, I journaled after each focus group and individual interview and then referred to my journal during the analysis portion of the study.

**Researcher as an instrument.** In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection and analysis instrument (Merriam, 2009) as discussed in the Researcher Role and Stance section. While this allowed me, as the researcher, to be responsive and adaptive during the interviews, I also accounted for the influence of any personal biases which are disclosed as well in the Researcher Role and Stance section. During the study, every effort was made to ensure objectivity with interview questions being open-ended and not leading as well as by constant critical self-reflection during data collection and data analysis which were documented in my research journal.

### **Data Collection Phases**

In order to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the study, I triangulated three sources of data using observation, focus groups, and individual interviews. Data collection occurred in three phases: Phase I, observation of the family support group; followed by Phase II, focus groups; and then followed by Phase III, individual interviews.

**Observations.** During the first phase of data collection, I completed an observation of the family support group observation on August 10, 2019. After reading aloud an informed consent in Spanish to the group (Appendix E), eight out of nine families who attended that day verbally agreed to be observed and notes were not taken on the one participant that did not agree to be observed. That day, another agency team was conducting a focus group collecting information on what additional information and resources the group needed. I obtained the agency's team's verbal consent to observe as well.

Participant observation is one data collection method in qualitative research by observing a phenomenon in a natural setting (Creswell, 2013). In order to gain a better understanding of the group, I observed as a nonparticipant (Creswell, 2013). While I had been participating with this group to establish rapport, during this observation, I did not participate in order to be fully focused on my observation. During my observation, I took notes regarding the setting, participants, activities, interactions, conversations, other subtle factors as well as reflective notes regarding what I noticed and thoughts that related to my research questions (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). In addition, after the observation, I journaled regarding additional thoughts, feelings, and ideas that arose based on my observation.

**Focus groups.** Focus groups are a frequently used data collection method in qualitative research to gather information on a specific topic which is obtained through semi-structured interviews that are facilitated by a group leader (Stalmeijer, McNaughton, & Van Mook, 2014). While focus groups were traditionally used in market research, this method became more popular in the 1980s and 1990s (Morgan, 2019) in the

areas of medical sociology, nursing, and health sciences (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997). During that time, focus groups were also used in the field of education to evaluate curriculum as well as to inform policy making or to develop program recommendations (Williams & Katz, 2001).

Williams and Katz (2001) defined a focus group as “a small gathering of individuals who have a common interest or characteristics, assembled by a moderator, who uses the group and its interactions as a way to gain information about a particular issue” (p. 2). Krueger and Casey (2000) stated that the main purpose of conducting a focus group is to create an environment where people feel comfortable sharing their ideas, experiences, and attitudes regarding a particular subject. Focus groups are found to be an effective method of gaining insight into people’s multi-faceted experiences as well as permitting joint construction of knowledge, providing richer information to a research question than a “singular truth” (Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman, & Geist, 2011, p. 402). In addition, focus group participants feel empowered since their input is encouraged and valued in this type of research while also being less intimidating than one-on-one interviews (Madriz, 2005).

One goal of focus groups is to document, recognize, and describe participants’ thoughts and behavior that have been shaped by their experiences, including the cultural lens through which they interpret their experiences that validates the use of focus groups with culturally diverse populations (Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, & Davidson, 2007). Another goal is to highlight emerging patterns of similar and different perspectives or *consensus* and *diversity* that emerges during a facilitated discussion (Morgan, 2019). The dynamic and social nature of the conversational interaction provides

the researcher with a deeper understanding of what the group has in common as well as how they differ (Morgan, 2019; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Careful selection of participants who have common experiences and identities enhances the collected data because shared experiences and identities facilitate increased comfort and willingness to engage in authentic discussions (Rodriguez et al., 2011). This becomes even more important when applying a culturally responsive lens to focus groups because grouping participants with common cultures provides an opportunity for diverse groups to share their experiences from their perspective, thus giving a voice to often marginalized people while also presenting an alternate viewpoint than the mainstream perspective (Rodriguez et al., 2011). Results from focus group studies can provide guidance on the development of strategies that can be used to improve outreach to a particular group (Marczak & Sewell, 1999).

Focus groups offered a culturally responsive technique to explore my research questions by gaining insights into the Spanish-speaking families who share a commonality of having children with a disability and who seek out support. In addition, focus groups conducted in the families' primary language, Spanish, allow them to use their primary language to express themselves. Findings from two focus groups with Spanish-speaking families provide valuable information that can be used to develop recommendations to improve special education family engagement for these families. In order to augment my findings from two focus groups, I also conducted four individual interviews that provided more in-depth information than what could be gathered during focus groups.

The size of the focus groups is a critical aspect of participant selection, with greater amounts of conversation associated with smaller group size (Morgan, 2019). When groups are smaller, ranging between five and six participants, the individuals have more time to talk (Morgan, 2019). For the purpose of Phase II of this multiple method research study, two focus groups were held with 3 participants in the first group and 10 participants in the second group with the focus group conducted in Spanish. While neither group was the optimal size, the group size resulted from circumstances related to difficulties in recruiting volunteers outside of the monthly group meeting time.

Initially, the family support group facilitators had invited me to recruit for focus group participants on the group's Facebook page; however, when I was ready to recruit, the Facebook page had been hacked which made it unusable for my purposes. Therefore, focus group participants were initially recruited by having interested volunteers sign up during a monthly support group meeting. I also asked them to indicate possible dates and times they were available. The volunteers were called, and the first focus group meeting was arranged on September 21, 2019 at a local community meeting room. Five volunteers had agreed to meet on this date, but on the day of the focus group, only three attended, despite repeated phone calls and text reminders. Because of the difficulty I had in recruiting focus group participants, one of the group facilitators assisted me in recruiting participants. A second focus group was scheduled at a local community meeting room with five volunteers on October 26, 2019; however, this time none attended despite repeated phone calls and text reminders.

After discussing the recruitment difficulty with the group facilitator, at the facilitator's suggestion, the third focus group was held as part of the group's monthly

November meeting on November 9, 2019 which resulted in a larger group of 10 participants. Two of the participants in the second group had participated in the first focus group but were included during the second group because excluding them would have left them by themselves out in the hallway, which felt rude and awkward; therefore, they were included. Because of this duplication of participants, I took careful consideration to not code and included the two original focus group participants' comments and opinions if they were repeated during the second focus group meeting.

During each focus group, participants were ensured confidentiality by self-selected pseudonyms and were advised of benefits and any associated risks. Signed consent was obtained from volunteers (Appendix E) and participants were presented with a \$20 gift card to a local retail store as a token to thank them for their time. All focus groups were audio-recorded with the participant's explicit consent, indicated by a signature on the informed consent form (Appendix E). The first focus group was one hour and 45 minutes in length, and the second group was one hour and 15 minutes.

The focus group followed Krueger's (2002) procedures of: (a) welcome, (b) an overview of the topic, (c) ground rules, and (d) questions. Breen (2006) and Krueger (2002) recommended spending the first part of the focus group by asking participants to share and compare the similarities and differences in their special education experiences, which is the warm-up section. During the second part of the focus group, questions focused on the key research questions of their motivation to attend the family support group and benefits of the family support group (Krueger, 2002). Focus group questions included Krueger's (2002) five types of questions: (1) opening question, (2) introductory question, (3) transition questions, (4) key questions, and (5) ending questions which are



included in Appendix F. Participants were identified on the audio by using the note taker's notations and by myself because I had become familiar with many of the participants' voices.

***Focus group piloting procedures.*** To ensure the validity of the focus group questions, I conducted piloting procedures by reviewing the questions with the family support group facilitator. Piloting is a method to check for clarity and content with a representative from my target group (Breen, 2006). I selected the family support group facilitator to pilot the focus group questions because he has years of experience working with these families and could give me feedback on my questions. Based on his input, I did not need to adjust focus group questions.

***Focus group field notes.*** A note taker accompanied me to the focus groups and observed the focus group, taking notes using a provided recording form (Appendix G), following Krueger's (2002) recommendations. The note taker was a retired bilingual Spanish teacher with her first language being Spanish. She was trained prior to the focus group sessions by discussing observation techniques of noting emotional and key comments, which participants interact the most, non-verbal communication such as body language and facial expression, and noting recurring themes or repetitive types of responses. In addition, the research questions, the focus group questions, and the note-taker response form were reviewed with the note taker before the focus group sessions.

During the focus groups, the note taker listened for and wrote down notable quotes that exemplified an important point of view such as statements that were eloquent or enlightening. The note taker also identified key points in the responses to each question, recorded any big ideas or thoughts that occurred during the focus group as well

as any other factors noted such as body language, passionate comments, head nods, and eye contact. I met with the note taker to debrief after each focus group to discuss what she noticed and responses she wrote down. Any new thoughts generated during this debriefing meeting were added to the field notes and were referred to during the data analysis phase.

***Focus group research journaling.*** In order to be transparent and account for any potential bias that could impact my data analysis (Ortlipp, 2008), I journaled after every focus group. Ortlipp (2008) recommended journaling as a method to address personal bias by critically analyzing experiences, thoughts, and feelings which helps make visible the inner workings of the researcher's thinking as well as how it evolves during the research process. During my journaling I noted the group dynamics and interactions, my feelings about how the focus group went, my thoughts on focus group questions, my reactions to families' responses, and any additional observations or occurrences of interest.

**Interviews.** Because focus groups may not provide as much information or details about the complexity of an individual's perspective, individual interviews are also often used in conjunction with focus groups (Morgan, 2019). Individual, or person-to-person interviews, are another common qualitative research method that is also used to collect data on an individual's opinions, attitudes, and personal experiences regarding a specific research topic (Seidman, 2013). During individual interviews, participants tell stories which, according to Seidman (2013), is a "meaning-making process" (p. 7). As participants tell their story, they need to reflect, select, and organize what details they want to share which becomes a meaning-making event (Seidman, 2013). Individual

interviews give the researcher more control of the conversation because the researcher can direct the conversation through focused questions, thus obtaining more detailed responses that can be garnered during focus group discussions (Morgan, 2019).

There are three different types of interviews ranging from highly structured, semi-structured, and unstructured or informal (Merriam, 2009). Highly structured interviews usually involve predetermined wording and ordering of orally presented questions during an interview such as a prepared survey or questionnaire (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured interviews include a combination of more and less structured interview questions that are orally presented with more flexibility and no specific ordering of questions (Merriam, 2009). Unstructured interviews ask open-ended questions with this type of interview having more flexibility and is more conversational (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured questions were used in this study because the purpose of the individual interviews was to seek a more in-depth understanding of a participant's perspectives on a particular topic while allowing some flexibility so that the interview was more natural. For this study, I individually interviewed four participants selected from the focus groups using semi-structured questions. The selection of the four participants for individual interviews was based on their level of engagement during the focus groups. Three mothers were selected because they were very engaged, and one mother was selected because she did not have much to say. Two mothers had been attending the family support group for several years and two mothers had attended a few meetings. I wanted to gather further insights from the three very engaged mothers and wanted to see if the quiet mother had more insights to offer in a more private interview. These four participants were interviewed after signing the focus group consent form and after verbally

consenting to be individually interviewed by phone which was digitally recorded (Appendix H).

Individual interviews were used in the third phase of the data collection in order to obtain more details about individual perspectives, opinions, attitudes, and experience with special education and the family support group (Morgan, 2019; Seidman, 2013). Individual interviews were utilized because they allowed me more control of the conversation than I had during the focus groups (Morgan, 2019). Using semi-structured questions allowed for some flexibility in the conversation but also allowed me to direct the conversation (Merriam, 2009). In addition, semi-structured interviews were open enough to allow for participants to add new meaning (Galletta, 2013).

Following Adams' (2015) recommendations for a semi-structured interview, a combination of closed- and open-ended questions were used as well as follow-up *why* and *how* questions. This combination of questions allows the interview dialogue as Adams stated to "meander around the topics on the agenda, rather than adhering slavishly to verbatim questions" (p. 493). The interview guide, based on Galletta's recommendations (2013), started with further exploration of the research topic, asking more general questions, moved to more specific questions, and ended by going back to the research question topic in order to make connections and move to closure. The interview guide, included in Appendix J, is a list of potential questions that were asked, depending on the responses, with some adjustment in wording based on the focus group interactions (Galletta, 2013). The individual interviews resulted in additional information that was used to compare to the focus group findings by identifying common patterns or

themes across both methods which increased the reliability of the findings since they occurred in the group and individual context (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

***Interview guide piloting procedures.*** In order to check the validity and content of my interview question guide, I completed piloting procedures using the family support group facilitator, as I did with the focus group questions. As stated previously, I chose to use the support group facilitator because he had years of experience working with Spanish-speaking families and provided feedback on my interview guide questions. Based on his feedback, I did not need to adjust the interview guide.

***Individual interview field notes.*** I took some quick notes during each individual interview to capture notable quotes, big ideas, and themes that I heard emerging (Krueger, 2002). I also noted non-verbal behavior such as laughter, crying, and silence (Krueger, 2002). However, I relied mostly on the audio-recording to capture the conversation so that any notetaking did not disrupt the conversation, especially when it became emotional as some did. To reduce the negative impact of note taking during individual interviews, I utilized the interview question guide as a note-taking form (Appendix J). These notes were referred to during the data analysis phase of my research study.

***Interview research journaling.*** I also journaled after each interview to account for and make clear any bias that may have impacted my data analysis (Ortlipp, 2008). I recorded my observations, feelings on how the interview went, any non-verbal behaviors that I noted, and other interesting statements made that were noteworthy.

**Multiple methods.** Using both focus groups and individual interviews allowed for a rich collection of data because these two types of interviews provided different

types of information (Morgan, 2019). Conducting focus groups first and then individual interviews afterward offered me the ability to construct broad meaning and then narrow to a more specific meaning. Focus groups provided the broader meaning from socially constructed group similarities and differences while individual interviews narrowed the focus, providing much more in-depth information of an individual's views and perspectives toward a phenomenon (Morgan, 2019). Using both types of interviews, or multiple method research for this study tapped into the strengths of both focus groups and individual interviews. In addition, using multiple methods to identify common patterns or themes across methods heightened the reliability of the findings because they occurred not only in the context of a group, but also with individuals (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

My critical race theoretical framework guided my data analysis to examine the experiences of people of color in order to explore and document racial inequities as well as advocate for improvement of such inequities (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). This study focused on identifying the common characteristics and motivation of a group of Spanish-speaking families that attend support group meetings in order to compare to current educational family involvement models with the end goal of developing recommendations to improve the ability of CLD families to access and increase their involvement in their children's special education programming.

**Transcription and translation.** As each focus group and interview were completed, I hired the retired bilingual Spanish-teacher, mentioned previously as my notetaker, to transcribe the focus group audio-recordings and interviews word for word in

Spanish. I then reviewed the audio-recording with the transcription to check for errors. Next, I translated the Spanish transcription into English and checked my translation with the bilingual Spanish-teacher to ensure my translation was accurate and captured the speaker's intended meaning.

**Thematic analysis.** I selected thematic analysis as my data analysis method.

Thematic analysis is one method used in qualitative research to identify emerging data patterns and themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) and can be used to develop theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is not specifically associated with any theoretical framework which makes this method flexible while also providing a detailed description of your data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes that emerge as most prevalent to the research question or themes that capture key elements in the data are determined by researcher judgment (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To allow for the data to speak for themselves, I used inductive thematic analysis, identifying thematic codes from the data without using pre-existing codes or any type of preconceived theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the data analysis throughout my study, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

***Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data.*** In order to familiarize myself with the data, I did repeated readings of the focus group and individual interview English transcriptions, searching for repeating patterns and meaning before coding. I chose to do the data analysis in English since that is my first language, while reviewing transcription and completing translation provided ample opportunities to become familiar with the data. I took notes in my research journal regarding my ideas for different codes as I did repeated readings.

***Phase 2: Generating initial codes.*** After familiarizing myself with the data by organizing comments by topic and themes and reviewing my coding ideas in my research journal, I developed initial codes. These initial codes were based on what I found the most interesting and related back to my research question regarding the common characteristics and motivation of Spanish-speaking families to be involved with a family support group. I gave full and equal attention to each transcription, matching my initial codes with the actual data.

During this phase, I used a peer reviewer to check for my accuracy in coding. The peer reviewer was a recent doctorate graduate with experience in qualitative research with families. The peer reviewer and I generated a list of initial codes based upon individual reviews of one focus group and one interview transcript. We reviewed and discussed our initial codes through email exchanges, and I made some adjustments based upon that discussion. I then continued to code independently the remaining focus group and interview transcripts. In addition, I coded my field notes and research journal. Finally, I then entered each initial code into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in order to be able to easily sort and group codes as well as generate a list of codes.

***Phase 3: Searching for themes.*** I then analyzed the list of codes and grouped them into meaningful themes, including broader overarching themes and subthemes which I color coded. I then created a thematic map to illustrate the resulting themes which is included in the results section.

***Phase 4: Reviewing themes.*** At this point in the analysis, I reviewed the themes I had developed and looked for recurring patterns. Next, I decided if themes needed to be revised such as dividing into different themes, joining themes together, or creating new



themes. Afterward, I reviewed my thematic mapping and revised it as needed to accurately represent the data. At the end of this phase, I had an accurate idea of my themes and how they related to each other.

*Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.* Once I had developed an accurate thematic map of my data, I then defined the data within each theme. This entailed identifying the story in each theme and how it related to the overarching story my data was revealing. At this point, I also identified sub-themes that existed within each theme as well. I then named each theme as well as sub-theme and had a clear definition of the themes. As a method to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, I discussed the final themes and subthemes with my peer reviewer by email where we arrived at a consensus on final themes and subthemes.

*Phase 6: Producing the report.* I then developed a write-up that concisely and accurately told the story that was within and across the themes in the data, which is detailed in the results section. I included examples and quotes to illustrate essential components, give voice to my participants, and relate the themes to my research questions.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

In order to address validity and reliability, when conducting qualitative research, credibility and trustworthiness are the main foci (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative investigator can establish credibility and trustworthiness by thoroughly explaining his or her assumptions illustrated by theoretical and conceptual frameworks and then clearly connecting the research questions and design to this framework (Merriam, 2009). Threats to credibility and trustworthiness are the researcher's bias which can impact data

collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). My personal biases included my experiences witnessing the barriers that impede CLD families from having access and being able to fully participate in the child's special education programming. To account for my biases, I used reflective journaling to make transparent my experiences, thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Ortlipp, 2008) that resulted from each focus group and interview as well as during data analysis. In order to increase credibility and trustworthiness of my study, I used four credibility measures: triangulation, bracketing, peer reviewing, and member checks.

### **Triangulation**

One manner of establishing validity and reliability in a qualitative study is through triangulation by using multiple sources of data and comparing and cross-checking the different sources of data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). External validity or transferability refers to how well the findings can be generalized to other situations (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). For this research study, multiple methods were employed using observation, focus groups, and interviews in order to triangulate the data by comparing and contrasting the findings from each source. In addition, I compared and contrasted my journal notes and the note taker's focus groups notes as other sources of data.

### **Bracketing**

As the researcher in this study, I was the main instrument for analysis which can be influenced by any unacknowledged preconceptions that I have related to the study (Tufford & Newman, 2010). In order to account for preconceptions and existing thoughts and beliefs, I engaged in a self-reflective practice called *bracketing* where I consciously

set aside prior knowledge and assumptions while keeping an open mind to what emerged from the data (Tufford & Newman, 2010). By acknowledging and making transparent my preconceived ideas regarding the inability of CLD families to fully access and participate in their child's special education programming, I suspended or put them aside as I analyzed the data. Bracketing allowed me to remain open and look for new perspectives in the data (Creswell, 2013).

### **Peer Reviewing**

An additional strategy to enhance credibility and trustworthiness is the use of peer reviewing as an external check (Creswell, 2013). Peer reviewing is used as an external check by using a peer who is knowledgeable about the research topic as well as the methodology during the research process (Creswell, 2013). For my study, I used a peer to review and calibrate coding during the thematic analysis of the data in order to increase the reliability of the coding. This was accomplished by having the peer reviewer and myself create initial codes for one of the focus groups and one of the interview transcripts. We then reviewed our codes, discussing similarities and differences. We reached consensus on initial codes, and then I continued to code the remaining transcripts independently. Furthermore, I collaborated with the peer reviewer on the identification and finalization of themes during the data analysis.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking is the fourth strategy I used to improve the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. Member checking is asking for feedback from some of the research participants to determine if they agreed with the preliminary results or if the results represented their perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). In order

to member check, I shared a summary of the final findings with two of the participants translated back into Spanish in order to obtain their feedback regarding their agreement with the findings. The two participants reviewed the summary and felt it was an accurate representation of the focus groups and their individual interviews; therefore, no changes were made.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In the area of ethics when conducting qualitative research, researchers must hold themselves accountable for a high standard of rigor, professional integrity, and competence in order to evoke trust that the study was done with integrity (Merriam, 2009). Ethically sound research is ensured by IRB approval as well as the researcher's commitment to conducting a trustworthy study (Merriam, 2009).

I ensured my study was ethically sound as possible by seeking IRB approval as well as committing to conduct my research in an ethical manner by ensuring my participants were fully advised of the purpose of the inquiry and the methods that were used as well as the safeguarding of their confidentiality and collected data. All audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, the research journal, and observation were kept on a password-protected computer during the course of the study. Paper-based questionnaires and consent forms were kept in a locked filing cabinet. All identifiable data, including audio recordings, questionnaires, and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding or permanent deletion from the computer three years after the study is completed.

Participants were given informed consent to sign before participating in the study which disclosed any risks, which were minimal, and how they would be addressed. Identified risks included the possibility of participants feeling psychological discomfort

or anxiety resulting from sharing their experiences. Referrals for counseling services were offered for one participant who cried during the individual interview, but she declined stating that she often got emotional when recounting the birth of her child with a disability and the difficulties the family encountered. I sought support from the group facilitator for one participant who reported feeling at a loss on how to find a Spanish-speaking psychologist for her child because the group facilitator was an advocate and was also more familiar with available services in the area than I was. Participant confidentiality was assured through the use of pseudonyms of their choosing when excerpts or quotes were shared in the findings.

### **Conclusion**

Research clearly demonstrates that family engagement improves academic outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2011; Jeynes, 2012); however, CLD families demonstrate lower levels of family engagement in special education (Jeynes, 2012) despite valuing education and supporting their child's academic success (Park & Holloway, 2013). Culturally and linguistically diverse families, including Latinx families, engage less due to cultural and language differences (Hughes et al., 2008) as well as to motivational barriers (Shah, 2009). A few studies have examined Latinx family motivation in relation to family engagement and found their engagement improved when they felt represented in decision-making (Shah, 2009), when they felt valued and respected for their expertise and insights regarding their children (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012), and when their children and teachers invited them to engage (Walker et al., 2011).

The purpose of this critical race theory study was to identify the common characteristics and motivation of a group of Spanish-speaking families that attend support

group meetings in order to compare current educational family engagement models and recommendations, with the end goal of developing recommendations to improve the ability of CLD families to access and increase their involvement in their children's special education programming. Spanish-speaking families' input was sought through two focus group and four individual interviews, augmented by an observation and my journaling during the process.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

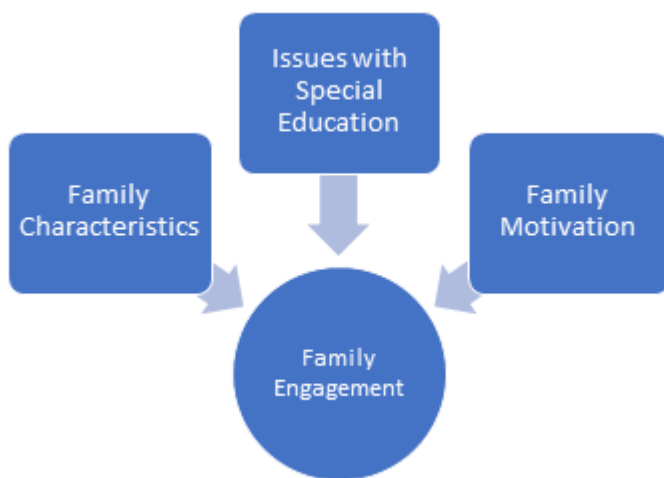
The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the motivation of Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities to engage in their child's education by identifying the characteristics and motivation of a group of families that attend family support group meetings. The motivational findings are then related to models and recommendations for family engagement to add to our understanding of how to effectively engage Spanish-speaking families in their child's education. Eleven Spanish-speaking families who had children with disabilities participated in focus groups, and 4 were individually interviewed. Semi-structured closed- and open-ended interview questions were used to allow me to direct the conversation (Merriam, 2009) while also allowing participants to share their experiences with the family support group (Galletta, 2013).

To better understand the motivation of Spanish-speaking Latinx families of students with disabilities to engage in their child's education the following research questions were posed:

- Q1 What are the common characteristics of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability and choose to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q2 What are the motivations of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q3 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current models of family engagement?

Q4 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current recommendations that enhance diverse parental/familiar participation in education?

This chapter presents findings obtained from focus groups and individual interviews with participating families. These findings fell into three categories of family characteristics, issues with special education, and family motivation, which then are related to the research questions (Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Category mapping.

The results are reported with thick, rich descriptions in order to tell the story that is within and across the themes in the data for the three categories: (1) family characteristics; (2) issues with special education; and (3) family motivation illustrated in thematic maps. I included examples and quotes to illustrate essential components, give voice to my participants, and relate the themes to my research questions. Quotes were included for nine participants while two participants did not say much during the focus groups except to agree, however, one of these quieter participants was individually interviewed therefore her quotes were included as well. Quotes were chosen because they illustrated the findings by using the participants exact words. Family self-selected



pseudonyms were used when directly quoted. The category of common characteristics is discussed in the next section, followed by issues with special education, and then common motivation.

### **Family Characteristics**

The characteristics of the combined focus groups were identified from the collected demographic information discussed in Chapter III (see Table 1 below). All participants were parents with no other type of caregivers which included 8 mothers and 3 fathers, for a total of 11 participants. Spanish was the primary home language of 10 participants, and 1 was a combination of Spanish and English. Six parents reported having none to limited English language proficiency, and 5 reported having moderate to good ability. All the 11 parent participants reported having a child with a disability with the children's ages ranging between 2-16 years of age. Nine of the children were reported as having autism spectrum disorder and/or Down syndrome, and 1 was identified with a traumatic brain injury. All parents had experiences with special education services, but the type of services differed. Nine parents had experiences with some type of special education services through the public schools, with 2 having experiences only with early intervention services. There were also some differences in how many meetings the parents had attended. Two parents were relative newcomers to the parent support group and had attended at least one meeting, while the majority had attended for one or more years. Due to the current anti-immigration political climate which has instilled fear and distrust in immigrants, any defining data such as occupation, country of origin, or immigration status were not collected in order to avoid suspicion among participants regarding my research study's purposes. However, after spending time with the group, it

became apparent that many parents were immigrants from Mexico based on their comments. Within the focus groups, the parents ranged in age from some in their twenties to some being middle-aged, estimated to be in their forties.

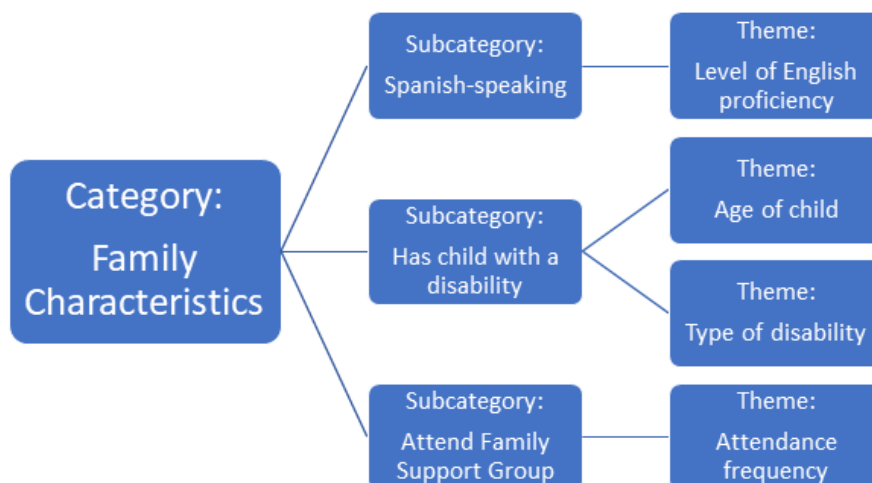
Table 2

*Demographics of Participants*

Participant/ gender	Pseudonym	Primary Home Language	English Proficiency	Child's Disability	Age of Child	Attend Family Support Group
1/female	Mariana	Spanish	None	Autism	9	2 times
2/female	Girasol	Spanish	Very little	Trisomy 2.1	5	4 years
3/female	Sandy	Spanish	30%	Autism;	13	8 years
4/male	Xavi	Spanish	10-20%	Hydrocephaly Autism	4	1 year
5/female	Rebecca	English and Spanish	Good	Autism	5	1 time
6/female	Beck	Spanish	90% understanding; 40-50% speaking ability	Autism; ADHD; Anxiety	15	Several years
7/male	David	Spanish	Little	Down syndrome	2	1 year
8/male	Kokis	Spanish	More or less	TBI	Teenager	Several years
9/female	Gloria	Spanish	Almost none	Down syndrome	16	Many years
10/female	Aventurera	Spanish	Understands; little speaking ability	Down syndrome; Autism	16	8 months
11/female	Lizeth	Spanish	90%	Down syndrome	6	Several years

*Note.* Explanation of acronyms: ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder); TBI (traumatic brain injury).

These findings of family characteristics are illustrated below in a thematic map (Figure 2). The map includes the subcategories of (a) Spanish-speaking, (b) has a child with a disability, and (c) attends the family support group as well as related themes.



*Figure 2.* Thematic map of family characteristics.

The characteristics illustrate the diversity in this study's participants regarding level of English proficiency which can impact families' ability to have clear and effective communication with their child's teachers. There was also diversity in the range of the ages of their children with a disability, with some families having many years of experience with special education programming and with the family support group, while others being relatively new to the world of special education and to the family support group. Despite some of the diversity in the group, I found they had common issues with special education which fell into related subcategories of (a) issues with special education staff, (b) issues with special education services, and (c) feeling like they had to fight for their child's services, which are discussed in the next section.

### **Issues with Special Education**

It is important to set the context by exploring the families' experiences with special education because these experiences can influence their motivation to participate in the family support group. Some families in this study reported being satisfied with

their child's special education program, while many were dissatisfied. The next section discusses the variability in family satisfaction with their child's special education program.

### **Family Satisfaction with Special Education Program**

As stated previously, some families in this study reported being satisfied with their child's special education program. The families that were satisfied were the two families who have children in early intervention programs indicating that early intervention programs were supporting these two families well. Additionally, a few other families had experienced special education programming at some point in their child's schooling. Positive relationships with the special education teacher and staff were reported as the main reason some families were satisfied. In addition, families reported positive experiences when they felt their child was progressing and receiving support. They also attributed their positive experiences to having frequent communication and collaboration with the special education teachers. This was illustrated in Sandy's remark, "Anteriormente en las otras escuelas ella había estado, yo se que ella se está desempeñando porque le ponen atención" [translation: Previously in the other schools she had been (her child), I know that she is performing because they pay attention to her.]. Mariana also commented that she was happier with her child's previous school due to their involvement as demonstrated in her comment, "En la primera me fue muy bien, los involucraban a los niños, lo que me gustaba que los llevaban a paseos" [translation: In the first (school) it went very well, they involved the children, taking them on walks, which I liked.]. In addition, Xavi reported that he was happy with his child's progress in his comment, "La verdad esta tan pequeño también y no hemos tenido una mala experiencia

en la escuela porque lo que se ha visto ha sido bueno. Despacio, pero ha ido pues avanzando poquito” [translation: Yes, and the truth is, he is so small too and we have not had a bad experience in school because what has been seen has been good. Slowly, but he has been moving forward a little.].

Several families reported dissatisfaction either currently or in the past with their child’s special education program which pertained to special education staff and special education services. These challenges and issues led to feelings of having to fight for services and advocate for changes in programming. Families related their need to be informed to being able to effectively fight to improve their child’s special education program. Families’ experiences with special education were grouped into subcategories related to why these families were dissatisfied with their child’s special education services. These subcategories were identified as (a) special education staff, (b) special education services, and (c) feeling like they had to fight for their child’s services, which is illustrated in the thematic map below with corresponding themes under each subcategory (Figure 3). The first subcategory of issues related to special education staff is discussed in the next section which is then followed by issues with special education services and the feeling of having to fight for their child’s services.

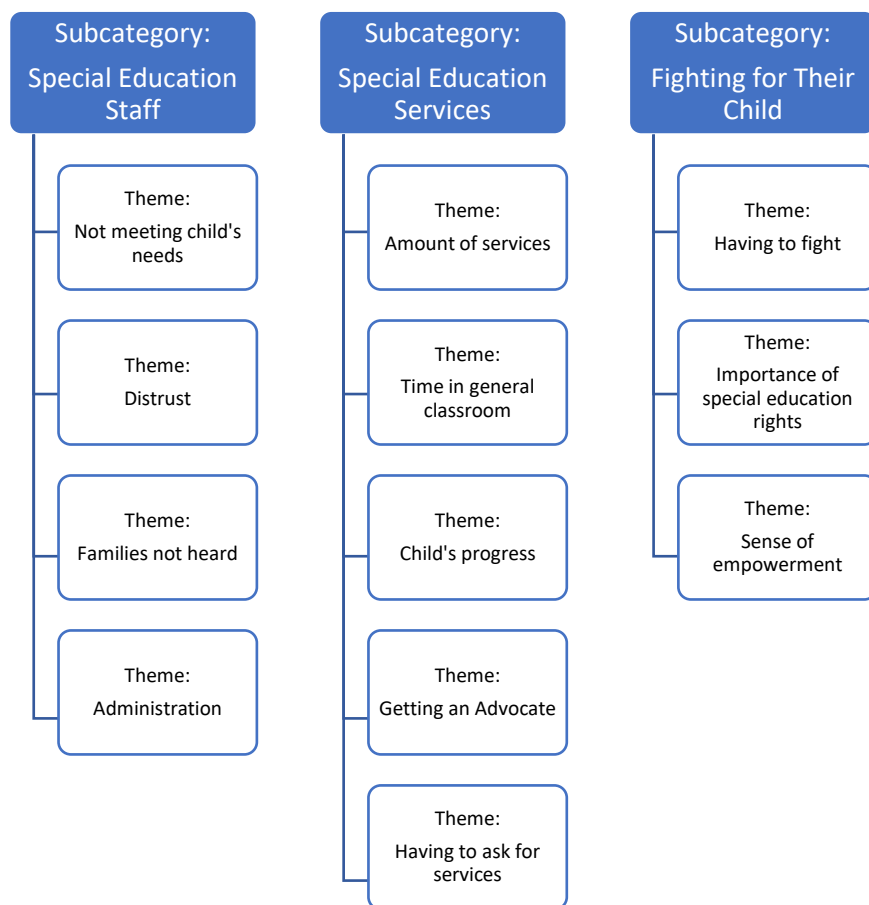


Figure 3. Family issues with special education and related themes.

**Special education staff.** Families reported dissatisfaction with the special education staff that pertained to the special education teachers and their assistants as well as special education service providers. In addition, family dissatisfaction related to families feeling that staff was not meeting the child’s needs, which led to feelings of distrust. Families feeling that their opinions were not heard was discussed as a reason for their dissatisfaction as well as issues with administration.

**Not meeting child's needs.** Families felt that special education staff and their assistants did not understand their child’s needs and, therefore, were not meeting those

needs, while also not having high expectations for their child. Girasol felt it was due to lack of patience as illustrated in her comment, “Como que no tienen la paciencia para aprender a los niños” [translation: Like they don't have the patience to learn about children.]. Girasol illustrated that special education staff did not understand her child when she said:

Dije, tú tienes un concepto de M.(name of child), pero ese no es M. Sabe más de lo que tú piensas. Y si no lo sabes como maestra es porque no te has dado el tiempo o no te has fijado realmente todo lo que M. sabe [translation: I said, you have a concept of M. but that is not M. M. knows more than you think. And if you don't know it as a teacher, it's because you haven't given yourself the time or you haven't really noticed everything M. knows.].

Some families felt that the special education teachers and assistants were responsible for too many children and, therefore, could not meet their needs. Sandy and Mariana both brought this up during the focus group. Sandy had heard that her child, who was nonverbal, was often left to sit on the floor by herself which caused her to start questioning her child's teacher about the child's daily routine as well as to question the ratio of children for each adult in the room. Mariana talked about how the previous year, her child had been in a classroom with 16 children, but after she complained that there were too many children and fought with the district to change classrooms, her child was then placed in a classroom with 6 children.

***Feelings of distrust.*** Several families talked about how they did not trust the special education staff during the focus group and during individual interviews. Because Sandy was concerned if her child was receiving appropriate support, but did not feel

welcome to arrive unannounced at school, she often showed up with the excuse of bringing something for her child so that she could see what was happening in the classroom. She recounts this in her comment:

Lo que hago es yo a propósito dejo algo que V. (her child) se le olvida. A V. para yo ir. Entonces sabes entonces la mama oh, aquí está la mamá de V. que trajo el pañal. Oh, que se pase [translation: What I do is I purposely leave something that V. forgot. So for V. I go (to school). Then you know the mom, oh, here is V.'s mom who brought the diaper. Oh, let her go.].

Mariana also felt like she was not welcomed to arrive at school unannounced but stated that she did not care; she did it anyway because she needed to see what was happening in the classroom. She explained her need to check on her child after he refused to go to school, “Entonces empecé ir a la escuela de sorpresa. Dije, ¿algo está pasando aquí, ¿verdad? Porque él no está a gusto” [translation: Then I started making surprise school visits. I said, something is happening here, right? Because he is not at ease.]. Sandy’s comment further illustrated her distrust, “De las escuelas, pues no creo que nos vamos a sentir apoyadas. No, le voy a pedir a la maestra” [translation: From schools, well, I don’t think we will feel supported. I’m not going to ask the teacher.]. A sense of distrust was evident in Girasol’s advice to the group that families needed to be very involved and constantly monitor what is happening at school.

***Not being heard.*** Several families reported that they did not feel like their opinions were heard by the special education staff when discussing the present levels of functioning and goals for the child. Three mothers, Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy reported that the school kept working on the same goal even after they brought work samples from



home to demonstrate that the child had made progress. They also discussed that in some instances, the school kept working on the same goal for a long period of time when it appeared to these mothers that this goal was not a good use of the child's service time and it was time to work on different goals.

Sandy reported that the occupational therapist had worked with her child on writing her name for three years with no progress, which she illustrates in her recount:

Por ejemplo, otra de las cosas que yo que yo que vimos en esa reunión es que ellas tienen todos los tres años que mi hija está en esa escuela, le están enseñando el nombre. Y que ella no podía usar un lápiz. O sea que ya no quería, ¿verdad? Entonces, para eso no sabían que la terapeuta ocupacional en casa y yo ya habíamos trabajado. Que yo le comenté dijo que voy a trabajar con ella en su nombre. Y mi hija con su terapeuta lograba hacer su nombre. Aunque sea intentarlo. Y yo ese día de la conferencia llevé lo que ella hacía que hablaran pues que no hacía cosas y ver que la terapeuta está haciendo esto. Y hasta la fecha la terapeuta sigue trabajando en eso [translation: For example, another of the things that I, that I saw in that meeting is that in all of the three years my daughter was in that school, they are teaching her name. And that she couldn't use a pencil. So, she didn't want to, right? So, regarding that, they didn't know that the occupational therapist and I had already worked on it at home. I told her that I am going to work with her on your behalf. And my daughter with her therapist managed to write her name. Even if it is an attempt. And that day of the conference I took what she had done to see what the therapist is doing (at home) when they talked

that she did not do things. And to date the therapist (at school) is still working on that.].

Girasol reported that the therapist had worked on the same fine motor goal of picking up marbles for two years with no progress, while she wanted to move on to something more educationally relevant like holding a pencil. When these mothers felt that their child had met a goal or believed it was time to move on to another goal, they felt the special education team did not take their opinion into account when updating the present levels of functioning and when creating the IEP goals. This is illustrated in Girasol's comment about goals or things the therapists were working on:

Cosas que yo siento que para M. ya no son de mucha importancia o de que él ya lo puede hacer o ya lo supero o que a mí me gusta o sea que haya metas y que avancen. O sea que no se queden allí porque aparte él se enfada de hacer lo mismo y ellas como que eso no lo tienen muy claro. Y ellas siguen en lo mismo lo mismo [translation: Things that I feel that for M. are no longer of much importance or that he can already do or he is over it or that I like so that there are goals and that they move forward. In other words, do not stay there because apart from that he gets angry at doing the same and they kind of don't know that. And they follow the same, the same.].

***Issues with administration.*** Several families reported that they had issues with the school administration as well, either because they felt ignored or because the administrators did not understand the special education rights of the child and parent. Sandy remarked that in her child's previous school, the principal would greet her if they passed in the hallway but at her current school, she felt the principal only acknowledged

her at meetings but not when she passed him in the hallway as exemplified in her account:

A veces el director ni saluda. Yo lo digo en mi caso. Y el día de la conferencia cuando saben que pasa algo, ¿Cómo está señora? Así como. ¿O a veces yo saludo pa' que se dé cuenta que está entrando un papa, o sea como hola como esta señora? Y más que si soy la única en el pasillo con él o sea no más hay diez papas que a veces yo paso y él ni siquiera un saludo [translation: Sometimes the director doesn't even say hello. I say it in my case. And the day of the conference when they know something is happening, how are you? Like this. Or sometimes I greet you so that you realize that a parent is coming in, that is like, hello, how are you Mrs.? And more than that, if I am the only one in the hall with him, that is, there are no more than ten parents that I pass sometimes, and he does not even say hello.].

Girasol felt that the administration at her child's school did not understand the special education rights of the child and the parent because they acted as if her requests were unreasonable. This is illustrated in her comment:

Lo que se necesita en las escuelas, empezando por la directora [es que] la área administrativa esté informada acerca de su mismo trabajo porque nosotros no estamos pidiendo algo que no deba de ser o no exista [translation: What is needed in schools starting with the principal, the administrative area, is (be)informed about her/his work because we are not asking for something that should not be or does not exist.].

Families' issues with special education staff and administration caused part of their dissatisfaction with their child's special education program. However, they also had issues with their child's special education services which is discussed in the next section.

**Special education services.** Many families had issues with their child's special education services. They related to either the amount of services, time the child spent in the general classroom, their child's progress, feeling the need to get an advocate, and feeling like they had to ask for services.

*Amount of services.* Several families discussed their issues with their child's special education services which came up in the focus groups and in three of the individual interviews. One father, Xavi, reported that he was not happy because his child's speech and language services had been reduced to once a month, which he thought was inadequate when the child's main area of concern was communication. Sandy discussed how the occupational therapist wanted to stop providing services because her child was not tolerating it. Sandy objected and asked why not keep the services at a level that her child could tolerate, as illustrated in her comment, "El dice porque ya ella se cansa. Le dije okay, pero no lo mueva del IEP, dejar que hay, lo que ella tolere" [translation: He says because she is tired. I said okay, but do not move it from the IEP, let what she tolerates stay.]. Another father, Kokis, discussed how he had fought for several types of therapies and specific goals for his child over the years despite feeling the special education team did not like it. This is illustrated in his comment, "Muchas veces no les gusta, pero a mí no me interesa. Se molestan. Eso es problema de ellos. Yo hago lo que pienso que está bien" [translation: Many times, they don't like it, but I'm not interested. They are bothered. That is their problem. I do what I think is right.].

*Time in the general education classroom.* Several families commented about wanting their child to spend more time in the general classroom, which came up in both focus groups and in three of the four individual interviews. Sandy discussed how she wanted her daughter to be in the general classroom even if it was for a short time when she commented:

Y están en un salón para niños especiales nada más que es una de las cosas que a mí no me ha gustado. A mí me gusta que a ella le pongan turnos con niños normales aunque sea cinco minutos, diez minutos [translation: And they are in a classroom for special children (which) is but one of the things I did not like. I like that they take turns with normal children even if it's 5 minutes, 10 minutes.].

Another mother, Girasol, also talked about wanting her child to be in the general classroom when she stated:

Yo leí la ley general de educación especial. Y allí la ley es muy clara. Dice que los niños de educación especial necesitan involucrarse con los niños típicos o en la medida posible asistir un salón regular para que ellos crezcan [translation: I read the general law of special education. And there the law is very clear. It says that special education children need to get involved with typical children or to the extent possible attend a regular classroom for them to grow up.].

Girasol clearly understood the benefits of having her child in the general classroom when she explained:

Nosotros como padres queremos que el niño, el niño de nosotros con condición sea lo más típico regular a todo niño. Esa es nuestra meta. Y entonces los niños aprenden de la observación, de la imitación. Por eso tienen que estar con niños

regulares [translation: We as parents want the child, our child with a condition, to be the most typical to regulate (like) every child. That is our goal. And then children learn from observation, from imitation. That is why they have to be with regular children.].

*Child's progress.* Another area related to special education services was the child's progress. Some families reported that they felt like they had to push in order to advance their child's skills, such as Kokis as demonstrated in his comment:

Y trabajando con las terapias hemos logrado cosas positivas que vamos trabajando poco a poco porque eso no se puede arreglar de un día al otro. Pero le va muy bien y yo hago todo lo que esté en mi para seguir terapia física o ver lo que hace falta [translation: And working with the therapies we have achieved positive things that we are working on little by little because that cannot be fixed from one day to the next. But he is doing very well, and I do everything in my power to continue physical therapy or see what is needed.].

Sandy talked about how an advocate had helped her realize that the special education teacher needed to help her child, who was an adolescent, to learn to use the bathroom instead of continuing to use a diaper. She described this realization in her explanation:

Pues cuando me ayudó la persona ella dijo, ¿Porque tu hija usa pañal todavía? Le dije pues porque lo tiene que usar. Dice, ella dice, no, ellas deberían de estar trabajando. Eso fue el año pasado y ya tenemos tres años en esa escuela. Dice que ellos deberían de haber estado hecho eso desde cuando . . . yo no sabía [translation: Well, when the person helped me, she said, why does you daughter

wear (a) diaper still? I told her because she has to use it. She says, she says, no, they should be working (on it). That was last year, and we already have been in that school three years. She says that they should have had that done since when (pause) I didn't know.].

***Getting an advocate.*** Several families reported that due to their frustration with special education staff and services, they had obtained the support of an advocate. These families felt that by having an advocate with them at the IEP meeting changed the staff's attitude towards them and improved their child's services as well. Mariana became very concerned with her child's special education program when he refused to go to school and came home scratched, so she got an advocate. She explained this in her description about talking with the advocate and then the events that occurred:

Le conté todo y me dijo investiga todo y si no cambian habla conmigo vamos a la escuela y vamos a ver qué pasa. Bueno la otra vez estuvimos diciendo que estaba pasando cosas en la escuela y resulta que pasaron varias cosas porque cambiaron todo los dos la principal la subdirectora, como apenas estuve en la junta la del IEP y cambiaron todos [translation: I told him everything and he told me he investigates everything and if they don't change, talk to me, we will go to school and let's see what happens. Well, the other time we were saying that things were happening at school and it turns out that several things happened because they changed all the two, the principal, the assistant principal. As I was just at the IEP meeting and they changed everything.].

Mariana then reported that the special education staff started listening to her after getting an advocate as demonstrated in her comment, “Y te digo que ahora ya que el trabajador

social yo me sentí ya ahora ya me están escuchando” [translation: And I tell you that now since the social worker (the advocate), I felt like now they are listening to me.].

Sandy also got an advocate because she was not receiving reports about her child’s progress. She explained how the advocate helped improve her child’s occupational therapy services when she reported:

Logró que estuviera la como se dice, la la del distrito, la coordinadora del distrito, y que estuviera todo el personal de todos los que éramos como quince personas y ella logró que que en todas la áreas se viera como estaban trabajando la de visión la de ocupacional, que yo había tenido problemas con ella porque no me presentaba un reporte [translation: She managed to get the one as they say, the one from the district, the district coordinator, and all the staff, of all of us who were like fifteen people, and she made it possible to see how the occupational focus was working in all areas, that I had had problems with her (Occupational Therapist) because she did not present a report.].

In addition, Beck discussed how she felt pressure to get an advocate when her child with autism was being suspended due to behavior. The topic of getting an advocate came up in one of the focus groups when Xavi asked how to find one because of his dissatisfaction with his child’s reduction in services, which resulted in other families giving advice on who to contact.

*Asking for services.* Several families commented that they felt the schools would not offer services, so you always have to ask. One mother, Gloria, was told to find her own support for her child. She reported she was worried because the special education teacher had told her that she had to find a psychologist to take her child to due to



behavior concerns and she felt at a loss, not knowing how to go about this. Girasol commented that she felt like if she didn't speak up, schools would not offer services since she didn't ask, as reflected in her comment, “Ella no habla, todo esta bien” [translation: She doesn't speak, (so) everything is fine.]. A father in the focus group, David, summarized the general consensus of the group:

Cuando uno no sabe, uno piensa que le van a ofrecerle lo que el niño ocupa. Y no van a ofrecerlo. Si uno no pide no lo van a ofrecer, aunque esté disponible.

Muchas veces si lo ofrecen, pero cuando uno sabe ya es mucho más fácil [translation: When one does not know, one thinks that they will offer what the child needs. And they will not offer it. If one does not ask, they will not offer it, even if it is available. Many times, they do offer it, but when you know now, it is much easier.].

The sense of having to ask for services was echoed in Girasol's comment, “Si uno no sabe, si uno no se informa, si uno no pide, no solicita, nadie lo va a ofrecer” [translation: If one does not know, if one is not informed, if one does not ask, does not request, nobody will offer it.]. This sentiment of having to ask for services was described by families, at times, as fighting for their children, which is discussed in the next section.

**Fighting for their child.** Families often used the word “fight” when talking about having to push the special education staff at their child's school for appropriate services and support. The topic of feeling a need to fight came up in both focus groups and in three out of four individual interviews. When this topic of fighting came up, Beck gave a great quote to the group, “La persistencia rompe la resistencia” [translation: Persistence breaks resistance,].

*Having to fight.* Several families reported that they had to fight to improve their child's special education services, which came up during both focus groups and in three individual interviews. Mariana reported how her child had come home scratched and started to refuse to go to school, so she fought with the school to have her child changed to a different class or school, even to the point that she kept him at home. Mariana also reported that she felt as a result of her fight with the school, the school changed teachers and assistants, so she is now happier with her child's program. Girasol stated she felt families had to fight in her comment, "No nos limitan ya les enseñamos que tenemos que pelear, que tenemos que defender" [translation: They don't limit us anymore, we teach them that we have to fight, that we have to defend.].

One mother, Aventurera, had been fighting the school district for several months to comply with her child's services, as detailed in the IEP created in another school district, but her current district had still not complied with the IEP. She reported that she had gone all the way to the superintendent's office with no results and was considering homeschooling her child. Aventurera's frustration is illustrated in her comment, "Lo que yo sé que estas personas sigue con necesidades especiales, ayuda profesional, tienen derecho pero en la escuela que yo veo que los servicios no se los dan, que ellos tienen derechos aunque que esté el ley" [translation: What I know that these people (children) continue to have special needs, professional help, they have the right, but at school I see that the services are not given to them, that they have rights, that is the law.].

A father, Kokis, described his fight for services differently when he described himself as being "stubborn" when pushing for services and support for his child. He said he would continue to be stubborn even if teachers did not like it. He summarized his

insistence for services when he described his experiences as, “Trabajando, trabajando y como muchas me dicen, terco. Con terco se puede hacer todo” [translation: Working, working and as many tell me, stubborn. With stubborn(ness) you can do everything.]. Sandy stated she did not want to fight, but felt like she was seen as adversarial when she asked questions about her child’s special education program as illustrated in her statement:

¿A qué punto podemos llegar que las maestras no sientan que uno está peleando? Yo lo que le tengo que saber, yo lo tengo que saber, tengo que preguntar. Tú sabes que tenemos que preguntar porque es. Tengo que estar informada. Qué está pasando [translation: At what point can we get where the teachers do not feel that one is fighting? What I have to know, I have to know, I have to ask. You know we have to ask why it is. I have to be informed. What's going on.].

***Importance of special education rights.*** Several families discussed the importance of reading and understanding special education rights of the child and the parents. They agreed that having knowledge of special education rights helped families fight the schools for services, appropriate goals, and spending more time in the general classroom. This was illustrated in Girasol using special education law to support her child being in the general classroom as discussed previously. During the first focus group, the mothers talked about the special education rights booklet that was available in their school district and shared with another mother where to get her own copy. During the second focus group, Beck discussed with the group the importance of special education rights and how she used them to help her change where her child was placed due to behavior issues.

*Sense of empowerment.* Families discussed their special education rights as information that gave them power. Beck reported that when her child was being sent to a residential program due to behavior concerns which made him depressed and suicidal, she read all the special education rights quickly so that she could be informed in order to help her child get out of that program. Girasol reported that she had used the law to support an argument she had with the teacher about her child's right to be in the general classroom as much as possible: "Le digo que esta es una base y si no me crees, ve a la ley de educación. Si no me crees, investiga" [translation: I am telling you that this is a foundation and if you don't believe me go to the education law. If you don't believe me, investigate.].

In more general terms, Mariana summarized this feeling of empowerment well when she said:

Los cambios los vamos a hacer nosotros. Cuando queramos un cambio somos nosotros los que vamos a hacer ese cambio. No la maestra ni otra gente. Nosotros. Entonces por eso no debemos de tener miedo de hablar o pedir lo que es derecho de nuestros hijos [translation: We are going to make the changes. When we want a change, it is we who are going to make that change. Not the teacher or other people. Us. So that is why we should not be afraid to speak or ask what is right for our children.].

Empowerment was further seen in comments made by Sandy, "No tenemos que dejar de hablar porque nosotros vamos a hacer ese cambio" [translation: We don't have to stop talking because we are going to make that change.].

Families' issues with special education staff and services, which made them feel dedicated to fight for their children, was a very clear overarching theme throughout the focus groups and individual interviews. Girasol illustrated this dedication when she stated that "No podemos ser muy blanditas porque así no nos hace caso. No nos hacen caso" [translation: We cannot be very soft because that is how (the school) ignores us. They ignore us.]. Kokis summed up his dedication to his child well when he said, "Todo lo que hago es por él" [translation: Everything that I do is for him.].

The issues and challenges families had with special education staff and services, as well as feeling that they had to fight for their child's services, sets the context because these issues and challenges can relate to their motivation to be part of the family support group. In the next section, I discuss the findings regarding the common motivation of these families to participate in the family support group.

### **Family Motivation**

The results of this study found that the common motivation of families to attend the family support group fell into two subcategories of (a) seeking social and emotional support, and (b) seeking information and resources. This is illustrated in a thematic map (Figure 4) with related themes in each subcategory. The findings for the first subcategory of seeking social and emotional support is discussed in the next section, which is then followed by the findings for seeking information and resources in the following section.

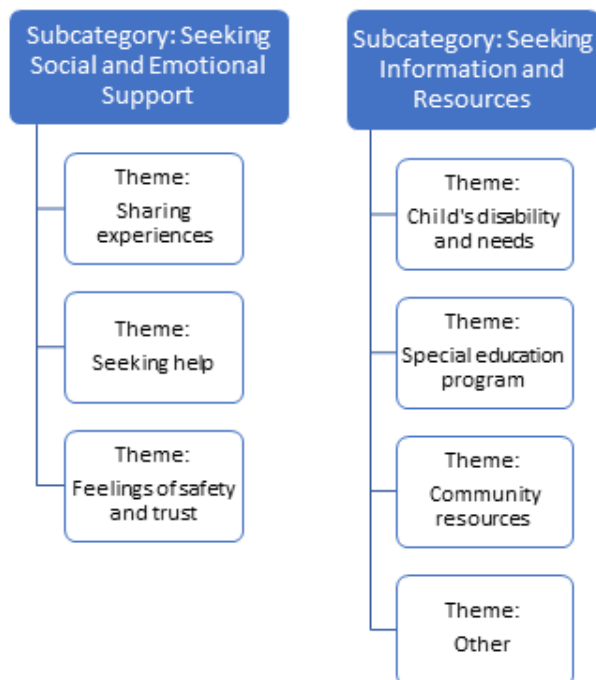


Figure 4. Motivation subcategories and associated themes.

### Seeking Social and Emotional Support

The general consensus of the families in this study was that they attended the family support group for social and emotional support, which was reported by families in both focus groups as well as by families during the individual interviews. This type of support was categorized into three interrelated themes of (a) sharing experiences, (b) seeking help, and (c) safety and trust.

**Sharing experiences.** One theme that emerged from the results was that all families mentioned the value of sharing their experiences in the family support group. Many participants commented that they came to the meetings for the discussions and the support they felt because they could discuss experiences and issues that the other families could understand. Families also reported that they valued being heard by others in the group. During individual interviews with Gloria, Sandy, Mariana, and Girasol, they all

shared that they had joined the group to learn from the experiences of others as was mentioned by other families during the focus groups. Mariana stated, “Vas a busca experiencia. A mi si me gusta [translation: You are looking for experience. I like it.]. Sharing experiences is also illustrated in Sandy’s comment, “Me gusta siempre estar allí saber de las experiencias de los demás papás y espero que es lo que sirve las experiencias de ellas y así estoy más conocimiento [translation: I always like to be there to know about the experiences of other families and I hope that is what works (in) their experiences and thus I am more knowledgeable.]. Sandy went on to further comment that “Realmente nos falta mucho que aprender” [translation: We really have a lot to learn.], which is why she recommends the group to other families. David, a father of a two-year-old, stated that he valued learning from the experiences of others, knowing what to expect and how to cope with his child’s needs and services as his child became older. This is illustrated in his statement, “Digamos también como ellos cuando mi bebe estaba pequeño porque ellos hemos aprendido de lo que dicen de los temas del estrés de los demás” [translation: Let's also say like them when my baby was small because they have learned from what they say about the stress issues of others.]. One mother, Gloria, said she felt the family support group was special because sharing experiences made her feel that the group was “Un grupo que se siente como de familia” [translation: a group that feels like family.].

**Seeking help.** Another theme that emerged from the results was the overwhelming sense that these families went to the family support group seeking help and advice from other families as well as from the group’s facilitators. This theme also connected to the other subcategory of seeking information and resources because this type of support could be social and emotional support, such as being validated and

getting advice on what to do, but could also fall into more concrete type of support, such as being provided information to help themselves and their child. Gloria stated, “El grupo para mi ha sido mucho apoyo” [translation: The group for me has been a lot of support.]. Lizeth echoed this in her comment, “Pues lo mismo. Mucha ayuda” [translation: Well, the same. A lot of help.]. Girasol acknowledged the facilitators’ hard work when she stated that the group was special because everything the group facilitators did was for the families and especially for the children.

During one of the focus groups, a discussion ensued where a father, Xavi, asked for advice from the group on how to get more services and support for his child with autism. Many families enthusiastically offered advice and people to contact in order to get services as well as where to find financial support, which exemplified the support families can find in this group. Xavi also asked the group their advice on finding an advocate which resulted in others giving advice and specific people to contact. Sandy added that even if there was not an answer to her question or concern, she could at least talk about it with the group. Additionally, Sandy mentioned that the group helps families feel like they are not alone. This is illustrated in Sandy’s comment, “Entonces imagínate para nosotros que es lo que estamos hablando que la confianza y sentirte que alguien te está respaldando que y más cuando estás sola” [translation: Then imagine for us what we are talking about, that trust and to feel that someone is supporting you and more when you are alone.]. Sandy’s sense of trust, another theme, is discussed in the next section.

**Safety and trust.** An additional theme that emerged during the focus groups and interviews was the sense that families felt they were safe to not only share their experiences and discuss their issues, but also they could trust that they would be heard by



the group. Many also commented that they trusted that they would get advice and support from not only the other families, but also from the facilitators. Trust and safety were mentioned several times during individual interviews as well. Girasol summarized well why she trusted the support group when she stated:

Y luego confianza porque estás conviviendo con personas que te entienden que sabes porque hablas. Porque vas a la plática y tú quieres hablar de tu hijo. Y las otras personas como no tienen el problema a ellos no les interesa. Es la verdad. Hasta que no tienes un niño, allí es cuando uno piensa hablar [translation: And then trust because you are with people who understand you, that know why you speak. Because you go to the talk and you want to talk about your son. And to other people as they do not have the problem, they are not interested. It's true. Until you don't have a child, that's when you think to talk.].

Sandy described how she trusted the group facilitators because they do all they can to help her find answers or responses which she felt helped her self-esteem as illustrated in her comment, “Como que a veces hacemos una pregunta y no te puede contestar allí pero háblame después o sea ahorita no te puedo contestar, agarra mi número y yo te puedo, cómo que ella pase lo posible por ayudar” [translation: Like sometimes we ask a question and she can't answer you there, but (she will say) talk to me later or I can't answer you right now, get my number and I can help you, like she goes out of her way to help.].

**Seeking information and resources.** All families in this study reported that they attended the family support group meetings because they are seeking information and resources to help not only their child, but also themselves. The information and resources mentioned by families can be divided into interwoven themes of (a) understanding the

child's disability and related needs; (b) understanding the special education process and programming; (c) community resources; and (d) other types of information such as insurance and financial resources.

Sandy talked about how she valued the information she received from the group in general terms in her comment, “Lo básico que te llama la atención es la información. Que una vez que ya vez que hay información, ya quieres seguir” [translation: The basic thing that catches your attention is the information. That one time and another there is information, you want to continue.]. Gloria reported that she liked the group because it was a place to get information, “Agarrar mucha información” [translation: To get a lot of information.].

However, it is difficult to separate the themes in this section because some families grouped types of information and resource together such as Aventurera who summarized that “El grupo provee servicios en la comunidad, analizan servicios, provienen información sobre organizaciones, los servicios que previenen como OT y PT y cosas así” [translation: The group provides services in the community, analyzes services, provides information about organizations, the services that prevent such as OT and PT and things like that.]. Beck valued the group for their trainings and support as illustrated in her statement, “Pero al fin de todo sé que con las capacitaciones que nos dan y con el apoyo que tenemos atrás vamos a llegar a donde tenemos que llegar” [translation: But at the end of everything I know that with the trainings they give us and with the support we have behind (us), we will get where we have to get.]. Sandy discussed how she liked the group's yearly conference, “Es me hizo más interés. Porque

tienen más recursos” [translation: It made me more interested. Because they have more resources.].

Compellingly, some families reported that the information and resources the group provided changed their lives. Kokis felt the group helped him in many ways which changed his life as reflected in his comment:

Se aprende mucho y le cambia la vida, las cosas que uno sabe incluso lo más importante, que aprenda cosas que uno no sabe, que beneficios tiene un niño, que educación uno puede agarrar, qué derechos, todo, todo, todo, hasta mi seguro me ha ayudaron. Yo estoy muy agradecido [translation: You learn a lot and it changes your life the things you know, even the most important thing you learn, things you don't know, what benefits does a child have, what education can one get, what rights, all, everything, even my insurance has helped me. I am very grateful.].

Girasol also discussed how the group had changed how she viewed her child with a disability:

Desde que fuimos, nos gustó porque allí vimos que había, como le digo, que nos enseñaron como a otro panorama que es la educación especial. Allí nos enseñaron que allí hay otro camino, hay otra cara, hay otra misión. Entonces eso es lo que nos asistió. Y la información que nos dan para de allí, yo digo que de allí obtenemos las bases para atender a nuestro [translation: Since we went, we liked it because there we saw that there was, as I say, that we were taught another panorama that is special education. There they taught us that there is another way, there is another face, there is another mission. So that is what assisted us. And the

information they give us from there, I say that from there we get the bases to support ours (child).].

Additionally, Sandy talked about the group helping her find people or a resource in her remark, “Quien me puede ayudar, que cosa que podemos buscar, personas que nos pueda ayudar en esta área” [translation: Who can help me, what we can look for, people who can help us in this area.].

*Understanding the child’s disability and needs.* Several families commented that the family support group helped them understand their child’s disability and related needs in general terms. Aventurera said that she loved the group’s workshop that trained families as therapists. Girasol explained that the group helped change her way of thinking about her child with a disability in her comment, which was a powerful statement to me as a special educator:

En el grupo aprendí que él se puede que se puede salir adelante forma exitosa, que no queremos ver con lástima o con como que pobrecito, como que no puede no para nada o sea todo es cómo o sea vimos como una esperanza, una nueva concepto de discapacidad [translation: In the group I learned what he can do, that he can succeed in a successful way, that we do not want to see with pity or like that poor thing as he cannot, not for nothing or everything is how we saw it, as a hope, a new concept of disability.].

*Understanding the special education process and programming.* Several families mentioned how the support group had helped them understand special education, mostly in understanding about their parental special education rights. This was illustrated

previously when Girasol used her knowledge of child rights when advocating for her child to be in the general classroom.

*Community resources.* Aventurera, Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy all commented that they valued the speakers that the group brought in to present to the families on various topics as well as group workshops and the group's yearly family conference. Sandy reported that she liked the yearly conference because "Los expertos nos hablan de derechos y de ciencia" [translation: The experts tell us about rights and science.]. During the times that I attended the monthly support group, presentations were made regarding local services such as adaptive programs for children with disabilities and behavior and mental health services. Mariana reported that the facilitators had helped her contact a local agency to find an advocate. Aventurera and Beck also discussed how the group facilitators helped them find an advocate.

*Other resources.* Throughout the focus groups and individual interviews, the group talked about other resources such as how to access types of insurance or find other sources of financial support for services outside of school. The discussion where the group gave advice to Xavier about finding outside services as well as financial assistance described previously illustrated how the group helps families with finding different resources. Additionally, Sandy discussed how she appreciated the legal advice that was offered during the yearly family conference.

The findings in this study depict a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability in their quest to find support and information in order to fight for the best special education services for their child. In the next section, I discuss how the findings relate to the research questions.

## **Findings in Relation to Research Questions**

The findings from this study fell into three categories: (1) family characteristics, (2) issues with special education, and (3) family motivation. In the next section, I will relate how these findings relate to the research questions.

### **Common Characteristics**

Q1 What are the common characteristics of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability and choose to actively participate in a family support group?

To answer the Research Question 1, examination of the results provide a description of the characteristics of the 11 participants as well as subcategories and themes. The subcategories of common characteristics identified were (a) Spanish-speaking; (b) has a child with a disability; and (c) attend the family support group. All families were Spanish speaking who had a child with a disability and who had attended at least one family support group meeting. In addition, all but one child either had autism and/or Down syndrome, except for one who had a traumatic brain injury. There were differences in the ages of the children as well as in the families' level of English proficiency, ranging from none to good proficiency. Furthermore, there was a difference between the number of family support group meetings the parents had attended, ranging from one to many years.

Despite the diversity in this group of families, the majority reported issues with their child's special education services that could impact their motivation to attend the family support group. The issues these families reported as well as the findings regarding their motivation are discussed in relation to the next research question.

## **Family Motivation**

Q2 What are the motivations of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability to actively participate in a family support group?

To answer Research Question 2, it is important to set the context by exploring the families' experiences with special education because these experiences can influence their motivation to participate in the family support group. Families' special education experiences and issues are discussed first, followed by a discussion regarding the common motivations found in this study.

**Issues with special education.** While a few families reported satisfaction with their child's special education program, the majority did not, which was related to different issues. Families' issues with special education were grouped into categories related to why these families were dissatisfied with their child's special education services because of (a) issues with the special education staff, (b) issues with special education services, and (c) feeling like they had to fight for their child's services.

***Issues with special education staff.*** Families reported issues with special education staff related to four themes: (a) not meeting the child's needs, (b) feelings of distrust, (c) not being heard, and (d) administration issues. The first theme of feeling like their child's needs were not being adequately met was found to be due to families feeling like the special education staff did not understand their child's needs and that teachers had difficulty meeting their child's needs because they were responsible for too many students. These concerns led to feelings of distrust towards the special education staff, which was the second theme that emerged. The third theme that emerged was that families felt that their opinions were not heard by special education staff when discussing their child's current levels of functioning and in the creation of new goals for the child's

IEP. Furthermore, the fourth theme identified was that families reported issues with administration because they either felt they were ignored or because the administration in their building did not understand the special education rights of the parent and the child.

***Issues with special education services.*** Under the subcategory of issues with special education services, the first theme in this area indicated that families had issues with the amount of services that their child was receiving, while the second theme revolved around families wanting their child to spend more time in the general education classroom. Families' concern with their child's progress was the third theme under this subcategory. The fourth theme indicated that due to families' dissatisfaction with their child's special education program, they sought out an advocate to help them fight the special education team for improved services. The fifth theme under this subcategory found that families were not happy because they felt that they had to ask for services since schools were not going to offer what was best for their child.

***Fighting for their child.*** The third subcategory, fighting for their child, arose out of their issues with the special education staff and services. Three themes emerged in this subcategory: (a) families feeling like they had to fight, (b) the importance of special education rights, and (c) families' sense of empowerment. The first theme found was that families felt like they had to fight for their child's special education services because they did not feel like the staff or services were adequate. The second theme related to how the families understood the importance of understanding the special education rights for themselves as parents as well as for their child. This knowledge gave them a sense of empowerment to fight to improve their child's special education services, which was the third theme.



The issues this group of families have with their child's special education program is important to consider because such difficulties can motivate families to attend the family support group. The findings from this study related to the motivations of families to attend the family support group are explored in the next section.

**Common motivation findings.** The findings in this study of common motivation of Spanish-speaking families that participate in a family support group fell into two subcategories of (a) seeking social and emotional support, and (b) seeking information and resources. The subcategory of seeking social and emotional support is discussed in the next section, and then seeking information and resources is discussed in the following section.

***Seeking social and emotional support.*** Under the sub-category of seeking social and emotional support, three themes emerged: (a) sharing experiences, (b) seeking help, and (c) feelings of safety and trust. Under the first theme, sharing experiences, families reported that they attended the family support group in order to share their experiences and learn from the experiences of other families. The second theme, seeking help, revealed that families also attended the support group because they sought help such as advice. The third theme, feelings of safety and trust, indicated that families felt safe sharing their experience with the group and trusted that they would be heard and would find support.

***Seeking information and resources.*** Under the subcategory of seeking information and resources, four themes emerged related to: (a) the child's disability and needs, (b) special education program, (c) community resources, and (d) other resources. The first theme that emerged was that families attended the family support group because

they sought information and resources regarding their child's disability and corresponding needs. The second theme that emerged was that families attended the support group because they sought information about the special education program. Families also attended because they were seeking information on other resources available in the community to support themselves and their child, which was identified as the third theme in this subcategory. The final theme identified was that families attended because they sought information regarding other resources such as insurance and other funding sources to help pay for services available outside of the school as well as legal advice.

### **Relationship of Common Motivation Findings to Family Engagement Models**

Q3 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current models of family engagement?

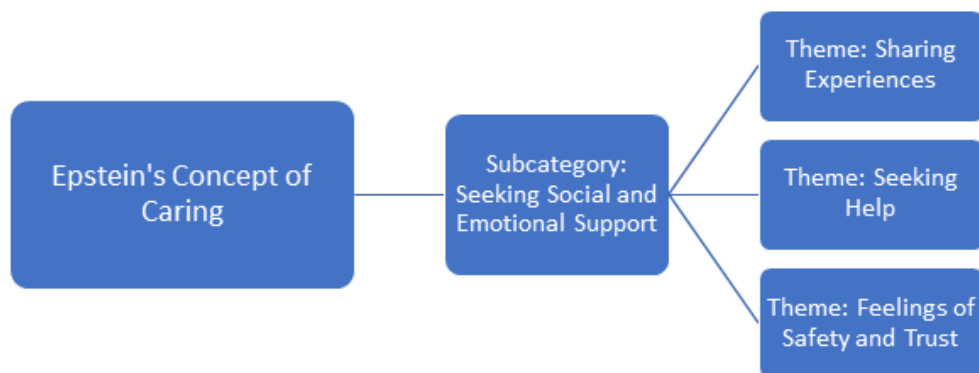
To answer Research Question 3, the findings in the three categories of (1) family characteristics, (2) issues with special education, and (3) family motivation are related to the two research-based models of family engagement discussed in Chapter II. The common characteristics of the families in this study that relate to this research question are that they are Spanish-speaking and have a child with a disability. These characteristics are foundational underpinnings when relating the results to current models because families' language differences and what they require to help them meet their children's unique needs adds additional considerations in order to support CLD family engagement.

## **Epstein's Spheres of Influence Model**

The first model of family engagement, discussed in Chapter II, was Epstein's Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 2010). Epstein described the shared interests and responsibilities of the family, school, and community partnerships as overlapping spheres of influence which are necessary in order for children to receive comprehensive support and opportunities that enhance their development. Epstein (2010) developed a framework of six different types of family engagement as a guide for schools to develop a comprehensive program which include (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision making, and (6) collaborating with Communities.

The two general subcategories of common motivation pertaining to (1) seeking social and emotional support and (2) seeking information and resources overlap and intersect with different types of engagement in Epstein's (2010) framework. Seeking social and emotional support relates broadly to the framework, while seeking information and resources has a clearer relationship to some types of engagement in Epstein's framework.

*Seeking social and emotional support.* Epstein's (2010) framework has the underlying foundational concept of caring that relates to trust and respect, which is how the common motivation of seeking social and emotional support best relates to her framework. The themes that emerged under the subcategory of seeking social and emotional support were (a) sharing experiences, (b) seeking help, and (c) feelings of safety and trust, which all relate to the concept of caring as illustrated in Figure 5.



*Figure 5.* Findings relationship with Epstein’s Concept of Caring.

Sharing experiences emerged as a theme under the subcategory of seeking social and emotional support, which included learning from others’ experiences. This relates to the concept of caring because families view the support group as a place where others care about them, demonstrated by others being willing to listen to them. Gloria, Sandy, Mariana, and Girasol all reported that they joined the family support group to learn from the experiences of others. David stated that he valued learning from the experiences of other families as his young child with a disability grew older.

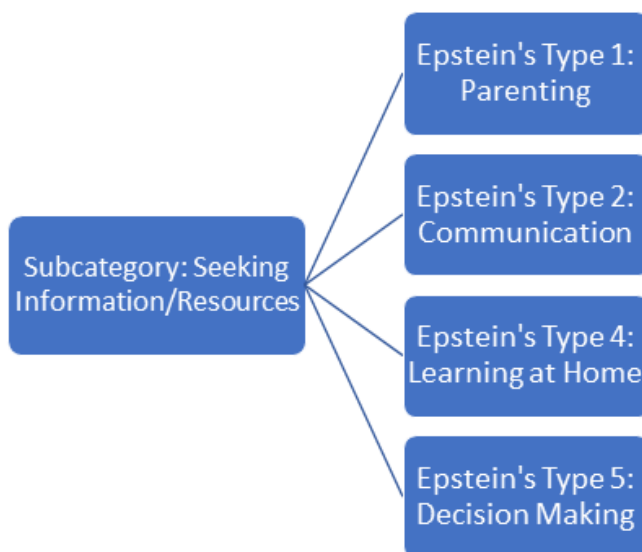
The next theme that emerged was that families go to the family support group because they are seeking help and advice from the other families and the group facilitators. This also relates to the concept of caring because families view the support group as a place where they can get advice or other types of help. Gloria and Lizeth both commented that they sought help from the support group. The sense of caring is illustrated in Sandy’s comment that she trusted the group facilitators because they did all they could to help her.

The third theme that emerged was feelings of safety and trust, which relates to Epstein's underlying concept of caring. Families reported that they feel the group is a place where they can share their experiences and discuss issues, relating to safety, while also trusting that they will feel supported. Girasol's comment illustrated this feeling of trust and safety, "Y luego confianza porque estás conviviendo con personas que te entienden que sabes porque hablas" [translation: And then trust because you are with people who understand you, that know why you speak.].

Epstein's (2010) underlying concept of caring, related to trust and respect, is found in all three common motivation themes related to why these families attend the family support group. In contrast, distrust of special education staff and school administration was evident during the individual interviews with three mothers, Girasol, Sandy, and Mariana. Next, I will discuss how the second subcategory of common motivation, seeking information and resources, relates to Epstein's framework regarding four different types of family engagement.

*Seeking information and resources.* The second common motivation subcategory found in the results of this study fell in the area of seeking information and resources, which can relate to Epstein's (2010) framework for Type 1 (Parenting), Type 2 (Communication), Type 4 (Learning at Home), and Type 5 (Decision Making). All families in this study reported that they attended the family support group meetings because they are seeking information and resources to help not only their child, but also themselves. The information and resources mentioned by families can be divided into interwoven themes of (a) understanding a child's disability and related needs, (b) understanding the special education process and programming, (c) community resources,

and (d) other types of information such as insurance and financial resources. Epstein's framework relationship to this study's finding under the subcategory of seeking information and resources is illustrated below in Figure 6.



*Figure 6.* Findings relationship to Epstein's Family Engagement Framework.

Most families spoke in broad terms when they reported that they attended the family support group for information. Mariana, Girasol, and Sandy all discussed how they came to the family support group meetings and activities because they wanted to learn about how to better support their child. This type of motivation can relate to Epstein's (2010) Type 1 (Parenting). Epstein's (2010) Type 2 (Communicating) relates more to the issues families reported with special education teachers and staff, which could influence their motivation to attend the family support group. Some families reported positive experiences when they felt their child was progressing and the teachers communicated and collaborated with them frequently. Sandy mentioned that she was happy with her relationship with her child's teachers when they discussed her child's progress with her on a consistent basis. Girasol also commented that she was much

happier this year with her child's teachers because she was told frequently how her child was doing in a positive manner.

Many families reported challenges and issues with their child's special education program which were related to staff and services. The challenges led to their feeling that they had to fight for services and advocate for changes in programming. These difficulties and issues could be linked to teachers not communicating well with the families, but this was inferred more than stated outright by families. Sandy mentioned that she felt like she did not know what was happening with her child currently and felt a need to stop by unannounced so she could see for herself. Mariana and Girasol both also mentioned that they felt it was necessary to visit the school unannounced so that they could check on their child and see what was happening in the classroom.

Initially, I did think family difficulties could be related to language differences because comments on their limited English skills came up a few times, and I have my own experience of witnessing how limited English skills can impact families' ability to effectively communicate with teachers. However, upon analysis and also being aware of needing to put my own bias aside, I found this was not a common issue mentioned by the participants, most likely because families often reported that they had an interpreter with them at meetings. Only one parent, Girasol, discussed how she had to fight to get her child's IEP translated into Spanish.

Epstein's (2010) Type 4 (Learning at Home) also related to the subcategory of seeking information and resources. During their individual interviews, Girasol and Sandy discussed their focus on working on their child's special education goals at home. Girasol specifically mentioned that she helped her child learn to identify the letters of the

alphabet, while Sandy reported how she worked with her child on writing her name.

David mentioned how the home therapist gave him ideas on how to help his child, but none of the families mentioned that they received information and ideas from the school.

Epstein's (2010) Type 5 (Decision Making) was the last type of family engagement that could relate to the common motivation of seeking information and resources. The families' issues they had with their child's special education teachers related to decision-making as well. Mariana, Girasol, and Sandy all reported that they felt like their opinions were not heard by the school staff when they were discussing their child's present levels of functioning and creating new goals at the IEP meeting.

Aventurera discussed how she was fighting the district to comply with her child's IEP services, which indicated to me that the district was making decisions regarding services for her child, without including her in that process.

The general feeling of fighting that came out of the focus groups and individual interviews, as a result of dissatisfaction with their child's special education program, can also directly be a result of families feeling like they are not included in decision making. While this was only directly mentioned by Girasol, Sandy, and Mariana, their adversarial feeling arose from not being heard or not being included in decision making. This was illustrated in Beck's report of her child being placed in a residential program because her comments indicated that she did not understand how her child's behaviors indicated a need to go to this type of program.

Epstein's Spheres of Influence Framework relates in broader terms to the results of this study which I found was because Epstein's framework focuses more on actions and activities such as meetings and sharing information while only discussing the



emotional aspects of relationship building in broad terms of caring. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model discussed next relates more closely to the findings of this study because it directly addresses psychological processes that impact families' motivation to engage.

### **Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model**

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler engagement model is based on psychological and contextual factors by defining influences and motivational factors that impact a family's decision to be engaged (Green et al., 2007). The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model provides three constructs that hypothesize why families become engaged which are based on (a) motivational beliefs and self-efficacy, (b) perceptions of invitations for engagement, and (c) family life contexts (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). In this study, the two subcategories of common motivation identified as (1) seeking social and emotional support and (2) seeking information and resources relate more closely to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) because this model focuses on the role of family motivation to become engaged in their child's education (Figure 7).

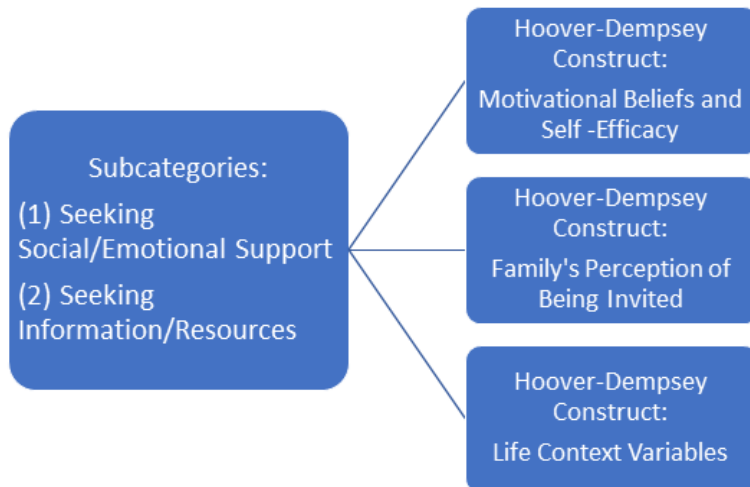


Figure 7. Findings relationship with Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model.

Motivational beliefs and self-efficacy constructs and their relationship to the findings in this study are discussed in the next section which is then followed by a discussion of the relationship of the findings with Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's constructs of perception of being invited and life context variables.

**Motivational beliefs and self-efficacy.** Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) defined motivation as two types of psychological processes or beliefs called role construction and sense of efficacy. Role construction is how the family defines their role and responsibilities in educating their child, and sense of efficacy is how the family views their own ability to support their child in his or her education.

**Role construction.** The two motivational subcategories found in this study, (1) seeking social and emotional support and (2) seeking information and resources, both relate to the families' role construction. Many families' comments in this study, including Girasol, Mariana, Sandy, Kokis, and Beck, indicated that they held an active role construction of being very involved in their child's education. A few did not have much

to say when discussing how involved they were in their child's education besides stating that they were satisfied. Upon analysis, I found that the few who did not appear to have an active role construction were families of young children who were not yet enrolled in public school special education programs, receiving early intervention support in the home. One mother, Gloria, who was individually interviewed, also did not indicate she had an active role construction based on her comments. Gloria reported that she had been happy with her teenager's special education services up to this point with no specifics on why she was satisfied, even when questioned further. Gloria's responses indicated to me that she might hold a less active role construction or view her role as less involved.

Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy clearly stated during a focus group and during their individual interviews that they wanted to be actively involved and participate in their child's education. All three mothers discussed how they supported their child's special education goals in the home. Girasol commented many times during the focus group and her individual interview that she felt she had to be very involved and constantly monitor her child's special education programming. Girasol reported that she regularly read books about her child's disability and was very familiar with special education rights for her child and for herself as a parent. She also talked about being very involved when discussing her child's present levels of functioning and goal creation during his IEP meetings. Sandy and Mariana both reported that they wanted to be involved in the creation of goals for their children during IEP meetings, but all three mothers, Girasol, Sandy, and Mariana, reported that they did not feel like the special education staff listened to their input and opinions.

A father, Kokis, was very clear during a focus group that he was involved in actively advocating for services and specific goals for his child. Beck also discussed in a focus group how she had been involved with her child's education over the years and currently was even more involved because she was fighting the district to change her child's placement from a residential program to another program.

*Self-efficacy.* The Hoover-Dempsey model describes how the family's beliefs of their own self-efficacy can also impact their level of engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The Hoover-Dempsey model posits that families will be more engaged when they believe they have the ability to positively influence the educational outcomes for their child. Positive self-efficacy is developed through personal positive experiences in educational engagement, by hearing of others' positive experiences, or by persuasion from others (Green et al., 2007). The families during focus groups and individual interviews discussed the importance of the special education rights for themselves as parents as well as for their child. Families demonstrated a sense of empowerment because they used their knowledge of special education rights when advocating for their child. This is illustrated in Girasol describing how she used her knowledge of special education rights to advocate for her child to spend time in the general education classroom. Beck discussed how she quickly read her parental rights in order to help get her child taken out of residential treatment. After being part of the family support group for many months and listening to families during the focus groups and individual interviews, I believe this is the most powerful aspect of the family support group because the group helps families develop positive self-efficacy by providing a place to discuss experiences and issues while also providing advice, workshops, and finding advocates for families.

The common motivation subcategories of seeking social and emotional support as well as seeking information and resources directly relates to self-efficacy because these families seek support which can relate to their need to feel more effective in supporting their child's needs. This need to build their self-efficacy is illustrated by many families reporting that they attend the family support group because they seek a place to discuss their experiences and issues where they will be understood and heard. Building self-efficacy is further illustrated when all families reported that the main benefit of the family support group for them was the information and resources the group provided. Sandy stated that she felt she had learned so much from the family support group over the years and that she recommended the group to other families.

Several of the families commented on how they continuously worked with the schools, sometimes to the point of fighting, to improve their child's special education programming and progress. Mariana, Girasol, and Sandy all reported that they had engaged an advocate in order to fight to improve their child's special education services. Based on the results from the focus groups and interviews, it appeared that the families felt empowered by what they had learned from the family support group which helped them be actively engaged in their child's education, whether their engagement was welcomed or not. Sandy talked about how she had learned so much from the family support group, and her sense of empowerment is illustrated in her comment, "No tenemos que dejar de hablar porque nosotros vamos a hacer ese cambio" [translation: We don't have to stop talking because we are going to make that change.].

I witnessed Mariana's growth in self-efficacy over time between the first focus group and later during monthly group meetings. She discussed how she had learned so

much from the family support group because when she first started, she was new to the U.S. and did not understand the special education system. I saw Mariana's confidence grow over time and how empowered she felt because her fight with the child's school had resulted in a big change in staffing and reduction in the number of children in her child's classroom. She became more vocal during the family support group discussions and gave her advice and opinions more freely as she became more experienced and confident. This sense of empowerment is well illustrated in Mariana's comment:

Los cambios los vamos a hacer nosotros. Cuando queramos un cambio somos nosotros los que vamos a hacer ese cambio. No la maestra ni otra gente. Nosotros. Entonces por eso no debemos de tener miedo de hablar o pedir lo que es derecho de nuestros hijos [translation: We are going to make the changes. When we want a change, it is we who are going to make that change. Not the teacher or other people. Us. So that is why we should not be afraid to speak or ask what is right for our children.].

Girasol's evolution into being a very involved or engaged parent became evident during a focus group and her individual interview. She discussed how she had learned when she first started going to the family support group a new positive way to look at her child with a disability and how her child was capable of making progress. She attributed the family support group for providing her with information and resources. Girasol also discussed how she read books and special education law to help her advocate for her child. She illustrated her improvement in self-efficacy when she reported how she used special education rights and the benefits of inclusion in general education to support her argument for her child to be included in the general classroom as much as possible.

**Family's perception of being invited.** The second construct of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model is engagement that is based on the family's perception of being invited to take part in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). The Hoover-Dempsey model describes invitations as general school invitations, specific teacher invitations, and specific child invitations. General school invitations go beyond simply being invited to school by including the school culture and environment. This includes if the school has a welcoming, respectful, and responsive climate that ensures families are well informed about requirements, events, and their child's academic progress (Green et al., 2007). The Hoover-Dempsey model describes specific teacher invitations as how well the teacher provides frequent, explicit, and realistic recommendations on how families can support their child to succeed academically (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010).

The results of this study relate to the school culture and environment aspect of the family's perception of being invited. Families' satisfaction with their child's special education program appeared to be dependent on their relationship with the special education teachers, staff, and administration as well as dependent on their child's progress. Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy all discussed how they were dissatisfied with the relationship they had at some point in time with their child's special education teacher, the classroom assistants, or with the school administration. All three also discussed how, at times, they did not feel welcome to visit their child's classroom unannounced, which did not deter them. All three also discussed how they did not feel heard by the special education teachers and school administration. Kokis discussed his stubbornness in advocating for services for his child, despite feeling that his input was not always welcomed. Families' feeling of not having their opinions or input being heard or not

feeling welcomed to visit their child's classroom indicate that the school culture and environment is not encouraging family engagement for the families in this study.

**Life context variables.** The third construct of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model is engagement that is based on the family's perceptions of life context variables (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). Life context variables influence families not only if they should be engaged in their children's education, but also what they feel able to do (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). The variables include the family's skills and knowledge that can be used to support their children during homework time as well as how much time and energy a family has available to devote to their child's education (Green et al., 2007). Family culture and circumstances can also play a role in life context variables that impact the ability of families to engage effectively and how they are able or choose to engage (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Overall, the families in this study did not discuss having restraints that impeded their ability to engage in their child's education. Girasol did mention how supporting her child with a disability is time consuming and adds to her responsibilities of taking care of her home and her other children. Sandy mentioned that she did not drive now, which impeded her ability to do as much volunteering as she would like to. There was some discussion about how to find financial support to pay for additional outside services for children. Overall, the general feeling I got from attending monthly meetings, during the focus groups, and during individual interviews was that families made the time to go to the support group meetings as well as attend workshops and the yearly conference because it is important to them.



In the next section, I relate the results of this study in response to Research Question 4. It compares the results to current recommendations to improve culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) family engagement.

### **Relationship of Findings to Family Engagement Recommendations**

Q4 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current recommendations that enhance diverse parental/familiar participation in education?

To answer Research Question 4, the findings are related to two intersecting family engagement recommendations, culturally responsive practices, and indicators of successful collaboration partnerships. The important role that family engagement plays in a child's academic success (Banerjee et al., 2011; Jeynes, 2012; Newman, 2004) indicates that special education professionals need to dedicate their efforts to creating and sustaining effective relationships with their CLD families. The Epstein (2010) and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) models of family engagement illustrate the importance of fostering a positive school environment, providing frequent and flexible opportunities for family-teacher interactions, effectively communicating with families, and actively listening to improve CLD families' ability to engage in their children's education. To achieve these goals, CLD family engagement can be accomplished by utilizing culturally responsive practices as well as characteristics of collaborative relationships. The findings from this study are related in the next section to culturally responsive practices followed by a discussion of the findings in relation to the characteristics of collaborative relationships.

## **Culturally Responsive Practices**

Five culturally responsive practices that support family engagement were identified by SEDL in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) and the Educational Development Center (Lavorigna, 2016). The five practices that support family engagement were identified as: (1) focusing on creating and supporting home and school relationships; (2) supporting existing familiar knowledge; (3) distinguishing and employing what works for families; (4) promoting cultural awareness; and (5) developing intellectual, social, and human capital for both families and schools. The findings in this study relate to all five of the culturally responsive practices. In the next section, I discuss the findings of this study in relation to each of the five culturally responsive practices.

**Focusing on creating and supporting home and school relationships.** The first practice of focusing on creating and supporting home and school relationships was evident in the findings in the context that the family support group is successful in fostering relationships with families. The findings in this study revealed that families attended the family support group for social and emotional support, which was reported by families in both focus groups as well as by families during the individual interviews. This type of support was categorized into three interrelated themes: (a) sharing experiences, (b) seeking help, and (c) safety and trust. Families reported being motivated to attend the family support group because they felt supported by the group demonstrated by the group being a safe place to share experiences and listen to others share their experiences. During individual interviews with Gloria, Sandy, Mariana, and Girasol, they all shared that they had joined the group to learn from the experiences of others as was

mentioned by other families during the focus groups. However, the findings in the area of the issues that families such as Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy had with the special education staff and services did not indicate that the school was fostering a positive relationship with these families.

**Supporting existing familial knowledge.** Supporting the existing familial knowledge was evident in the family support group because all families reported that they attended the support group for information and resources. The information and resources mentioned by families in this study were divided into interwoven themes: (a) understanding the child's disability and related needs, (b) understanding the special education process and programming, (c) community resources, and (d) other types of information such as insurance and financial concerns.

Gloria reported that she liked the family support group because of the information they provided, and Sandy discussed how she valued the information she got from the support group. Girasol stated that the group helped her view her child as capable despite having a disability as illustrated in her comment, "Porque me ayudó, me abrió los ojos, me dijo, esto se puede" [translation: Because it helped me, it opened my eyes, it said to me, "This can be (done)."]. Several families mentioned how the group had helped them understand their parental special education rights. Aventurera, Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy all valued the speakers that the group had present on various topics as well as group workshops and the group's yearly family conference. Furthermore, during the focus groups, families talked about how the group provided information on other resources such as how to access types of insurance or find other sources of financial support for services outside of school.

**Distinguishing and employing what works for families.** During the monthly meetings that I attended as well as at the yearly family conference, I witnessed that the family support group identified what works for families and then provided what the families needed. Twice during the times I attended the monthly meetings, the facilitators asked families to fill out a survey form to indicate what topics they wanted to learn more about. I also noted that the support group provided free childcare and refreshments during each monthly meeting. During her individual interview, Gloria discussed how the provision of free childcare had helped her greatly because she was able to attend the support group meeting while knowing that her child was taken care of. Overall, the families in this study felt that the support group facilitators did so much for the families as illustrated in Girasol's comment that she felt the group was special because everything the group facilitators did was for the families and, especially, for the children.

**Promoting cultural awareness.** The family support group promoted cultural awareness by asking special education staff to attend their yearly conference. During the first focus group, Sandy discussed how she was looking forward to the conference and reminded the other families that they were supposed to invite their child's special education providers. Additionally, twice during the monthly meetings that I attended, other agencies conducted focus groups to gather information on early childhood services as well as behavioral support needs. Allowing this type of research promotes cultural awareness for CLD families because it allows agencies to gather information that can improve their services for CLD families. Based on the family input, the findings did indicate whether schools were promoting cultural awareness or not.

**Develop intellectual, social, and human capital for both families and schools.**

Mapp and Kuttner (2013) discussed how the practice of developing intellectual, social, and human capital helps empower school staff and families to view themselves and their role differently, which helps them become “confident, active, knowledgeable, and informed stakeholders in the transformation of their schools and neighborhoods” (p. 9). The group supports the development of intellectual, social, and human capital by providing a place where families can share and discuss their issues while also providing trainings, workshops, and speakers on specific topics. The sense of empowerment that families felt as a result of understanding their special education rights was evident in the comments made by some families. Girasol discussed how she used her knowledge of special education rights to advocate for her child to be in the general classroom more. Empowerment also was evident in Mariana’s comment, “Los cambios los vamos a hacer nosotros” [translation: We are going to make the changes.].

The findings in this study demonstrate how the family support group supports families using culturally responsive practices by (1) focusing on creating and supporting home and school relationships; (2) supporting existing familiar knowledge; (3) distinguishing and employing what works for families; (4) promoting cultural awareness; and (5) developing intellectual, social, and human capital for both families and schools. In the next section I discuss how the results relate to the indicators of collaborative partnerships.

**Collaborative Partnerships**

The five culturally responsive practices discussed previously can be combined with the six indicators of successful collaborative partnerships in order to improve CLD

family participation and engagement in the special education process (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). The six indicators of successful collaborative partnerships include: (1) communication, (2) commitment, (3) equality, (4) professional competence, (5) mutual trust, and (6) mutual respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). It is essential that CLD families engage in the special education process in order for special education professionals to understand their family goals as well as to help identify their children's cultural and linguistic strengths and differences (Harry, 2008). In the next sections, I discuss how the findings in this study relate to each of the six indicators of successful collaborative partnerships.

**Communication.** Effective collaborative family-school relationships are built on frequent, open, and honest communication (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). The findings of this study validate that the family support group strives to provide opportunities for open and honest communication during the monthly group discussions. The facilitators also support improving communication between families and the school by providing information and training so that families can fully understand how special education works in a public-school setting, thus helping to remove any false expectations. The results of this study also provided some insight into whether schools were creating successful collaborative partnerships in the area of communication. When some of the families reported that they were satisfied with their child's special education program, their comment indicated they were satisfied when they felt that the teachers communicated with them frequently. In contrast, families' dissatisfaction with their child's special education program can be attributed to communication breakdowns which contributed to the families' distrust that their child's needs were being met.

**Commitment.** As an indicator of successful collaborative relationships, commitment is described as special educators demonstrating dedication to families and their children (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Commitment is characterized by teachers demonstrating that their students' families are valued as well as demonstrating that they value the school-family relationship (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Commitment is also demonstrated by teachers focusing on the child's best interests and holding high expectations for the child (Rossetti et al., 2017). In addition, commitment is characterized as teachers giving extra attention, time, and work to support the child and family's needs (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

The findings in this study relate to commitment when examining the family support group because the group demonstrates to the families that they value them by all the services they provide on a volunteer basis. These include facilitating monthly meetings and finding professionals to provide trainings or speak to the group about a particular topic as well as by providing individualized support. Sandy discussed how she felt the facilitator always took the time to listen to her and would find an answer to Sandy's questions if possible. However, in the issues that families reported having with their child's special education program, the findings indicate that schools are not demonstrating commitment to some of these families. This is exemplified in that Girasol, Sandy, and Mariana all discussed how they did not feel welcomed to arrive unannounced at their child's school or that their opinions were not heard during IEP meetings.

**Equality.** Equality as an indicator of a successful collaborative partnership is exemplified by a harmonious relationship between families and the school (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Such a relationship requires that special education staff listen and

acknowledge the families' point of view, their strengths, and expertise while also ensuring families have ample opportunities to participate (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). During special education meetings, equality manifests when everyone feels comfortable contributing (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

The findings in this study indicate that the family support group supports equality by providing families opportunities to share their experiences and listen to each other. However, these findings also indicate that schools are not practicing equality for some of the families as illustrated in the issues they have with their child's special education program. Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy all discussed how they did not feel that their opinions were heard during IEP meetings when discussing their child's present level of functioning or when they felt goals needed to be changed.

**Professional competence.** Professional competence is a necessary component of a collaborative relationship and is characterized by families feeling confident that their child's needs are well understood and supported (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Special educators who are willing to learn and seek to continue to learn exemplifies professional competence as well (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Professional competence is further demonstrated by special educators providing comprehensive support for both the child and family (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

In this study, the findings indicated that the family support group instills confidence because the facilitators have extensive experience working in different areas of special education and bring in speakers who have expertise in different topics. In contrast, it appears that schools are having difficulty in meeting this indicator of successful collaborative relationships for some families. Families reported dissatisfaction



with their child's special education program because families felt that the staff was not meeting the child's needs, which led to feelings of distrust. Girasol commented on how she felt the special education staff did not understand her child's needs. Sandy and Mariana both discussed how they felt that the special education staff were responsible for too many children making it difficult to meet the children's needs. Furthermore, Girasol questioned the professional competence of the administration because they did not understand her special education rights as a parent nor the rights of her child.

**Mutual trust.** A critical component for a family-school collaborative relationship is mutual trust (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Demonstration of reliability creates trust by special education staff following through on promises and actions. Trust is also fostered by special educators' reassurance of the family's child's safety as well as through dignified interactions with both the child and the family (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Maintenance of confidence and confidentiality instill trust as well with families (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017).

The family support group instills trust because the facilitators listen to the families when they have issues and are seeking help. Sandy commented that the facilitator always took the time to listen to her and seek out answers for her. Girasol's statement that all the facilitators did was to support the families and their children also indicated a sense of trust in the group. In the area of school-family relationships, families in this study reported feeling distrustful of the special education staff because they did not feel like their child's needs were understood or were being met. Distrust was evident when Sandy and Mariana discussed how they felt like they had to arrive unannounced at their child's school in order to see if their child was being well supported. Families also felt distrust

because they felt like they had to ask for services for their child to the point of having to fight for services. This was illustrated in Girasol comment, “Si uno no sabe, si uno no se informa, si uno no pide, no solicita, nadie lo va a ofrecer” [translation: If one does not know, if one is not informed, if one does not ask, does not request, nobody will offer it.].

**Mutual respect.** Another critical component for a family-school collaborative relationship is mutual respect (Haines et al., 2015). Special educators convey respect when they demonstrate value for a child by talking about them as a person and not a disability label (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Respect is further demonstrated for CLD families by calling them by their last name, being on time for meetings, and valuing the family’s support for their child (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017).

The results of the findings in this study related to mutual respect in broader terms because the specific aspects were not mentioned directly by families during the focus groups or individual interviews. The family support group demonstrates respect for the families by listening to their issues and helping find answers, exemplified when Sandy reported that she felt the facilitators always listened to her and helped her. The overall sense of not feeling respected by school staff could be inferred from families reporting not being heard as reported by Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy. Lack of respect can also be inferred by these three mothers reporting that they did not feel welcomed to arrive unannounced at their child’s school.

The six indicators of collaborative partnerships (communication, commitment, equality, professional competence, mutual trust, and mutual respect) (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017) relate to the findings in this study. The family support group’s actions and offerings characterized all six indicators that support their successful

collaborative partnerships with families. The findings in this study also indicated that schools are not always exemplifying the six indicators which can negatively influence the families' engagement in their child's education. Despite this study finding that schools were not striving to create collaborative relationships, Girasol, Mariana, Sandy, Kokis, and Beck all were not deterred and were still engaged, but in a more adversarial manner. This was illustrated in their comments of having to fight for their children's special education services.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the motivation of Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities to engage in their child's education by identifying the characteristics and motivation of a group of families that attend family support group meetings. The findings from this study fell into three categories of (1) family characteristics, (2) issues with special education, and (3) family motivation based on the result from two focus groups and four individual interviews, with each category having subcategories and associate themes. The categories, subcategories, and associated themes were then related to the research questions, restated here.

- Q1 What are the common characteristics of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability and choose to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q2 What are the motivations of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q3 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current models of family engagement?
- Q4 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current recommendations that enhance diverse parental/familiar participation in education?

Findings for Research Question 1 related to the findings of the subcategory of common characteristics of the participating families which were (a) Spanish-speaking, (b) had a child with a disability, and (c) had attended at least one family support meeting. Findings for Research Question 2 related first to the issues families had with special education because that set the context because their experiences can influence their motivation to participate in the family support group. Families' issues with special education were grouped into subcategories related to why these families were dissatisfied with their child's special education services which fell into issues with (a) special education staff, (b) special education services, and (c) feeling like they had to fight for their child's services.

Findings for Research Question 3 related to how the findings in the three categories of (1) family characteristics, (2) issues with special education, and (3) family motivation relate to the two research-based models of family engagement, Epstein's Spheres of Influence model (2010) and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The common characteristics of the families in this study that related to this research question were that they are Spanish-speaking and have a child with a disability. These characteristics were noted to be foundational underpinnings when relating the results to current family engagement models because families' language differences and what they require to help them meet their children's unique needs adds additional considerations when fostering family engagement with CLD families.

Families in this study were found to be motivated to attend the family support group because they were (1) seeking social and emotional support, and (2) seeking information and resources. These motivational findings were found to overlap and

intersect with different types of engagement in Epstein's framework (2010). Seeking social and emotional support related broadly to Epstein's underlying concept of caring and the related concepts of trust and respect. The other subcategory of seeking information and resources had a clearer relationship to four types of Epstein's family engagement in the areas of: (a) Type 1: Parenting; (b) Type 2: Communication; (c) Type 4: Learning at Home; and (d) Type 5: Decision Making.

The findings in two subcategories of common motivation, seeking social and emotional support and seeking information and resources, were found to relate more closely to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) than the Epstein model because this model focuses more on the role of family motivation in family engagement. The subcategories of seeking social and emotional support as well as seeking information and resources were found to relate to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler constructs of (a) motivational beliefs and self-efficacy, (b) family's perception of being invited, and (c) life context variables.

Findings for Research Question 4 related to how the findings related to two intersecting family engagement recommendations of culturally responsive practices (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) and indicators of successful collaboration partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). The subcategories for common family motivation that included seeking social and emotional support and seeking information and resources were found to relate to the five culturally responsive practices that support family engagement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The family support group was found to support families by implementing the five culturally responsive practices: (1) focusing on creating and supporting home and school relationships; (2) supporting existing familiar

knowledge; (3) distinguishing and employing what works for families; (4) promoting cultural awareness; and (5) developing intellectual, social, and human capital for both families and schools. In contrast, families' issues with special education indicated that schools were not always implementing the five culturally responsive practices.

The findings indicated that the family support group was also successful in implementing the six indicators of successful collaborative partnerships in the areas (1) communication, (2) commitment, (3) equality, (4) professional competence, (5) mutual trust, and (6) mutual respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). However, again, based on the issues that families reported with special education, the findings indicated that schools were not always successful in implementing the six indicators.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Research has shown that CLD families have difficulty effectively engaging in their children's education due to barriers related to cultural and language differences (Goldsmith & Robinson Kurpius, 2018; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Park & Holloway, 2013; Wong & Hughes, 2006; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Diverse families encounter similar barriers when attempting to engage in special education to support their children with disabilities (Cohen, 2014; Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009; Hee Lee et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Park et al., 2001; Salas, 2004; Zarate, 2007). These barriers can result in CLD families being less engaged (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Wong & Hughes, 2006) which educators may attribute to lack of motivation, concern, or not valuing their children's education (Lopez et al., 2001). However, Latinx families report that they do value their child's education, but may define their roles and responsibilities differently (Auerbach, 2007; Barton et al., 2004) such as deferring to the teacher's expertise in education decisions as a sign of respect while believing that education is the main responsibility of teachers (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Wong & Hughes, 2006; Zarate, 2007). Latinx families may also engage in different ways (Auerbach, 2007; Ceballo et al., 2014) such as providing home support that includes behavioral guidance and holding high educational expectations for their child (Durand & Perez, 2013). Motivation can play a role as well in CLD families' willingness to be engaged (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Shah, 2009; Walker et al., 2011). Shah (2009)

found that Latinx families were more motivated to engage when they saw other Latinx represented in positions of power and in decision-making. Jasis and Ordonez-Jasis (2012) found that Latinx were more motivated to engage when they felt a sense of belonging and purpose as well as when provided multiple opportunities for participation.

In my work as a speech-language pathologist, I have witnessed the barriers that Spanish-speaking families encounter which impacts their ability to fully engage in their role in special education decision-making and program planning as mandated by IDEA (2004). While there has been extensive research on the barriers CLD families' encounter when trying to engage (Cohen, 2014; Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009; Hee Lee et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Park et al., 2001; Salas, 2004; Zarate, 2007), there has been limited research into motivational reasons of diverse families to become engaged in their children's education (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Shah, 2009; Walker et al., 2011). The purpose of this study was to add to that understanding by exploring the motivation of a specific group of Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities and who choose to engage in a family support group. The goal of this study was to help improve our understanding which can inform special education teams on how to increase Latinx family motivation to engage in the special education process in order to improve equity for Latinx families while also meeting the family participation intent of IDEA (2004).

The results in this study provided valuable insights into the motivation of a group of Spanish-speaking families who chose to engage in a family support group which related to the challenges and issues they have or have had with their children's special education staff and services. Families viewed the family support group as a place where



they could find different types of support they were not finding in the schools. The results provided guidance on how special education teams can help motivate CLD families by providing support and information. Results also provided guidance on how special education teams can improve CLD family motivation by establishing relationships that are characterized by frequent communication, listening to families, valuing families' opinions, having a good understanding of each child's needs, and appropriately supporting those needs.

### **Restatement of the Research Problem**

The number of children who are identified as CLD as well as those identified as ELs is increasing in public schools (NCES, 2018). Within students identified as ELs, the largest number are identified as Hispanic with Spanish as their home language (McFarland, 2016). English learners have demonstrated a consistent achievement gap in reading and math over time (Murphey, 2014) and are overrepresented in special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Family engagement has been proven to improve academic outcomes in general education and special education and, therefore, is one area that schools can focus on to improve academic outcomes for their ELs (Banerjee et al., 2011; Jeynes, 2012; Newman, 2004). The importance of family engagement is recognized in IDEA (2004) which mandates family participation in special education decision making and program planning (Wolfe & Durán, 2013). The IDEA also provides families with special education rights in decision making and program planning (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2010).

Epstein's (2010) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) models of family engagement provide guidance on how to improve family engagement by advocating for a positive school environment, effective communication, and provision of multiple opportunities for family-teacher interactions. However, despite wanting to be engaged in their children's education, diverse families may not engage in ways that are understood or recognized by schools (Barton et al., 2004). Culturally and linguistically diverse families, such as Latinx families, can face barriers that impact their ability to engage due to their cultural and language differences (Goldsmith & Robinson Kurpius, 2018; Park & Holloway, 2013; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Language barriers could include limited English proficiency (Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009; Hee Lee et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; Lee & Park, 2016), overuse of medical jargon in special education meetings (Dinnesen & Kroeger, 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; Jegatheesan, 2009; Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004), and the complexity of the English language used in written special education documents (Jegatheesan, 2009) as well as issues with poorly-prepared interpreters (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008). Cultural barriers could include that CLD families view education as the responsibility of the teacher (Wong & Hughes, 2006), while Latinx families culturally hold teachers in high-esteem which may impact the families' ability to disagree or state their opinions (LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Zarate, 2007).

Motivation can also be a barrier that impacts CLD families' willingness to be engaged in their child's education (Shah, 2009) such as needing to feel a sense of belonging (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012) as well as needing to see diversity in those who hold power and make decisions (Shah, 2009). Additionally, level of income and

education can impact CLD families' ability to engage; however, while schools have little control over level of income or parent education levels, they can improve CLD families' motivation to be engaged (Shah, 2009).

Schools can foster CLD family engagement by using culturally responsive practices (Harry, 2008) in combination with indicators of collaborative partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017) as well as by improving CLD families' motivation to become engaged (Shah, 2009). By focusing on implementing these practices, schools can improve CLD family engagement not only in general education, but also in special education which can improve academic outcomes as well as meet IDEA's (2004) mandate of family participation.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a better understanding of the motivation of Spanish-speaking families of children with disabilities to engage in their child's education by identifying the characteristics and motivation of a group of families that attend family support group meetings. The motivational findings were then related to models and recommendations for family engagement to add to our understanding of how to effectively engage Spanish-speaking families in their child's education. Eleven Spanish-speaking families who had children with disabilities participated in focus groups, and 4 were individually interviewed using semi-structured interview questions.

To better understand the motivation of Spanish-speaking Latinx families of students with disabilities to engage in their child's education the following research questions were posed:

- Q1 What are the common characteristics of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability and choose to actively participate in a parent support group?

- Q2 What are the motivations of a group of Spanish-speaking families who have a child with a disability to actively participate in a parent support group?
- Q3 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current models of family engagement?
- Q4 How do the identified common characteristics and motivation relate to current recommendations that enhance diverse parental/familial participation in education?

An analysis of the findings from this study indicated results fell into three major categories: (1) family characteristics, (2) issues with special education, and (3) family motivation. In this chapter, the three categories, their identified subcategories, and related themes are discussed in relation to each research question as well as comparison of findings to the current literature. Family characteristics findings related to Research Question 1, while issues with special education and family motivation both related to Research Question 2; therefore, these two findings are both discussed in relation to Research Question 2.

## **Findings**

### **Family Characteristics**

A review of the results for Research Question 1 provided a description of the characteristics of the 11 participants as well as subcategories and themes which is illustrated in the table below (Table 3). The subcategories of common characteristics of the participating families were identified as: (a) Spanish-speaking, (b) has a child with a disability, and (c) attends the family support group. Ten out of 11 participants were primarily Spanish speakers with a range of English language proficiency. All 11 families had a child with a disability, and 10 of these children were reported by their families as having autism spectrum disorder and/or Down syndrome. Nine of the families had

experience with special education services through the public schools, while 2 had experiences only with special education early intervention services. In addition, 9 out of 11 families had attended the support group for one or more years, and 2 had attended at least one family support group meeting.

Table 3

*Demographics of Participants*

Participant/ gender	Pseudonym	Primary Home Language	English Proficiency	Child's Disability	Age of Child	Attend Family Support Group
1/female	Mariana	Spanish	None	Autism	9	2 times
2/female	Girasol	Spanish	Very little	Trisomy 2.1	5	4 years
3/female	Sandy	Spanish	30%	Autism;	13	8 years
4/male	Xavi	Spanish	10-20%	Hydrocephaly Autism	4	1 year
5/female	Rebecca	English and Spanish	Good	Autism	5	1 time
6/female	Beck	Spanish	90% understanding; 40-50% speaking ability	Autism; ADHD; Anxiety	15	Several years
7/male	David	Spanish	Little	Down Syndrome	2	1 year
8/male	Kokis	Spanish	More or less	TBI	Teenager	Several years
9/female	Gloria	Spanish	Almost none	Down syndrome	16	Many years
10/female	Aventurera	Spanish	Understands; little speaking ability	Down syndrome; Autism	16	8 months
11/female	Lizeth	Spanish	90%	Down syndrome	6	Several years

*Note.* Explanation of acronyms: ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder); TBI (traumatic brain injury).

Despite the diversity in the families' English proficiency and type of special education experience in this study, the group reported common issues with their

children's special education program as well as their continued advocacy to support their children. These results can relate to findings by other researchers who reported that Latinx Spanish-speaking families had difficulty effectively advocating for their children with disabilities due to cultural and language barriers (Hardin et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2002; Salas, 2004). While I suspected that part of these families' issues with special education could be attributed to limited English proficiency, I found that the families did not discuss having any significant issues related to language differences. When specifically asked if they encountered any language barriers, most families reported they did not because they were provided with an interpreter. The only comments that came up in this study were Girasol's discussion regarding her struggle to get her child's IEP translated in Spanish.

The findings that these families' issues with special education were not reported by families to relate to language differences is not necessarily conclusive. Special education issues that families discussed indicated that some issues may be due to breakdowns in communication, but it is not clear if language differences played a part in these breakdowns. Research suggests that language differences can place families at a disadvantage because they may not be able to actively participate in their child's special education program when they are not provided all the information in a language they can understand (Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009; Hee Lee et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2002; Park et al., 2001). Since these families did not consistently report significant barriers due to limited English proficiency, I take this as a hopeful indication that schools are striving to comply with IDEA (2004) requirements that schools must do what is

necessary so that families can understand what is happening during special education meetings.

### **Family Motivation**

A review of the results for Research Question 2 revealed two findings related to this research question, with one being families' issues with special education and the other being families' common motivation to attend the support group. Understanding families' issues with special education was important to explore because their issues could influence their motivation to attend the family support group.

**Issues with special education.** The issues that families reported with special education in this study were found to be important to understand because they set the context to better understand the families' motivation to attend the family support group. While some families reported being satisfied with their child's special education program, the majority expressed being dissatisfied either in the past or currently. Many families in this study expressed dissatisfaction with their child's special education program, which fell into three related subcategories: (a) issues with special education staff, (b) issues with special education services, and (c) feeling like they had to fight for their child's services.

***Special education staff.*** Families' issues with the special education staff were found to have four related themes: (a) not meeting the child's needs, (b) distrust, (c) families not feeling heard, and (d) issues with administration. The issues families discussed in the area of special education staff encompassed the special education teachers and their assistants as well as other special education service providers and administration. Several families reported feeling that their child's needs were not being

adequately met, which led to feelings of distrust toward the special education staff.

Mariana, Sandy, and Girasol talked about how they felt a need to make surprise visits to the school in order to check on their child and see what was happening in their classroom. These types of actions indicated to me their feeling of distrust because they needed to see for themselves what was happening with their child.

When examining the literature for distrust in Latinx families, this study's findings relate to the Rodriguez, Blatz, and Elbaum's (2014) research of 96 parents of children with disabilities, of which 24% were Latino. Rodriguez et al. (2014) found that parents needed to trust that their child was receiving agreed-on special education services and needed to interact more with teachers when they thought their children were not being adequately supported. The feeling of distrust found in this study is similar to that discussed by Rodriguez et al. (2014) in how some families felt distrust because they were not sure their child's needs were being met. The distrust felt by families in this study is a clear indication that there is a breakdown in communication between the special education team and the families. However, as discussed previously, it is not clear if this communication breakdown is partly due to language differences or for other reasons.

One possible reason for a communication breakdown can be due to special education teachers not frequently communicating with families. One method I have seen work well to ensure frequent communication is using a daily communication notebook. During the first focus group, Sandy talked about how she valued a communication notebook because her child is non-verbal and could not tell Sandy herself how her day went at school or what happened. However, a communication notebook would need to be translated into Spanish for non-English speaking families, or special education staff could



utilize electronic communication methods using programs that have translation capabilities.

Several families in this study discussed feeling like they were not heard by the special education team. Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy specifically talked about how they felt their opinions regarding their child's present levels of functioning or appropriate goals were not taken into consideration. These findings are similar to Salas' (2004) study of 10 Latinx mothers of children with disabilities who reported that they felt that their concerns were not heard by the special education teams. Not being heard by the special education team is another clear indication of a breakdown in communication which goes against the IDEA (2004) mandate of families as partners in special education. However, again, it is not clear if language differences played a role in not being heard by the special education team.

One possible reason that these families did not feel heard by the special education team could be attributed to how a team may view IEP goal mastery. Based on my special education experience, the team could have felt that the child had not yet met a specific goal, despite doing it at home, because the team may have needed to see a specific frequency of the skill, in order to ensure mastery, before moving on to a new goal. If this was the case, the special education team did not clearly explain that to the families in this study. Another possible reason for the families not feeling heard by the special education team in this study could be because their opinions were not valued or were discounted as found by Salas (2004) in his study of Latina mothers who had children with disabilities, but my findings did not shed light on specific reasons.

Two mothers in the study reported concerns that they had regarding the building administration which indicated issues related to school culture and professional competence, which is not conducive to improving family engagement. Researchers have discussed how Spanish-speaking Latinx families need to feel like the school is welcoming and staff is approachable because their language differences and limited knowledge of U.S. schooling systems may make them feel embarrassed to interact if they do not feel like they are wanted in the school (Lee et al., 2012). Woods, Morrison, and Palincsar's (2018) findings that administrators view special education as a separate system from general education also could relate the findings of issues with administration in this study because administrators may not be well-versed in special education.

***Special education services.*** In this study, 8 out of 11 families reported issues with special education services which were found to revolve around five themes: (a) the amount of services; (b) time in the general classroom; (c) the child's progress; (d) getting an advocate; and (e) feeling like they had to ask for services. Other studies have found similar family dissatisfaction with special education services a common theme (Slade, Eisenhower, Carter, & Blacher, 2017; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Families' issues with special education services in this study could relate to findings by Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) who reported that CLD families may have more difficulty in obtaining special education services than other families. Additionally, families' issues with special education services in this study may relate to research by Magaña, Lopez, Aguinaga, and Morton (2013) of differences in services between 48 Latino and 56 White children with autism. In this study, Magaña et al. found that Latino children received fewer services and had more unmet needs when compared to White children.

Several families in this study discussed how they wanted their child to spend more time in the general education classroom, which was discussed in both focus groups and in three of the four individual interviews. The understanding that children with disabilities can benefit from being in the general education classroom was demonstrated by several families in this study. Such understanding reflects that these families have acquired that knowledge, but it is unclear if this information was gained through the family support group.

Some families also talked about their concerns with their child's special education progress, which was talked about most often in general terms. Kokis discussed how he felt he had to push for services in order to advance his child's skills, and Sandy talked about how an advocate made her realize that the special education team needed to work on helping her adolescent child be toilet trained. I believe, based on my experience in special education and my experiences as a parent, that families are universally concerned that their child makes progress, which makes Kokis' determination to push for services not unusual. Sandy's realization that it was appropriate to expect the special education staff to help toilet train her adolescent daughter is concerning to me because, based on my special education experience, toilet training is a life skill that is addressed usually in preschool and early elementary unless it is apparent such training is not feasible.

Another theme that emerged during families' discussion regarding issues with special education services was that several families resorted to finding an advocate due to their frustration with special education staff and services. These families sought help from the support group facilitators in order to find an advocate, but it was unclear if they wanted an advocate because the support group had suggested it. Mariana, Girasol, and

Sandy all discussed how they felt they had to get an advocate, which they thought resulted in an improvement in their child's special education services. Beck also discussed how she felt pressured to get an advocate when her child with autism was suspended. These mothers' feeling like they needed to get an advocate relates to the findings of Burke, Magaña, Garcia, and Mello (2016) who found that Latinx families often have difficulty advocating for their children by themselves. These findings in relation to families seeking an advocate are different from other findings of families becoming advocates which are discussed further in this chapter.

The last theme that was identified was that families felt like they had to ask for special education services because they felt that the special education staff was not going to offer them. In this study, most families did not give specific details on what services they were seeking, except when David referred to wanting more speech and language services or Girasol and Sandy discussing occupational therapy services. The findings in this study are similar to findings by other researchers who found that Latinx families of children with disabilities also reported feelings of distress because they felt like they had to ask for special education services (Angell & Solomon, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2004). However, neither the Angell and Solomon (2017) or Shapiro et al. (2004) study specified what types of services the families requested.

I suspect that the families having issues with having to ask for services in this study could relate to a type of discomfort that may be related to cultural differences. Shapiro et al. (2004) attributed Latinx families' distress in asking for services as a cultural difference that arose due to Latinx coming from a high context culture that values relationships that are warm, trusting, and caring. Shapiro et al. suggested that when

Latinx families suspected that special education teams were not being forthright or open regarding available services for their children, they became distrustful and suspicious. However, I believe any family, regardless of cultural background, would feel the same if they believed available services that would benefit a child were not being offered.

***Fighting for their child.*** Families' discussion about having to ask for services in this study was often described by families as fighting for their children. This feeling of fighting for their child was found to relate to three themes: (a) having to fight, (b) the importance of special education rights, and (c) a sense of empowerment. The word “fight” came up often during both focus groups and during three out of four individual interviews. I was saddened when Sandy discussed how she did not want to fight, but felt she was seen as being adversarial when she asked questions about her child’s special education program. This finding that families felt like they had to fight for services is similar to Angell and Solomon’s (2017) findings that Latinx parents of children with autism reported that they had to be prepared to fight or battle for services which Angell and Solomon termed a “warrior identity” (p.1149).

In relation to the feeling that families had that they had to fight for services, families discussed the importance of knowing their special education rights. Families were in agreement that such knowledge helped them fight for services, appropriate goals, and spending more time in the general education classroom. It appeared to me that families felt supported by special education rights, and they referred to “rights” often during their discussion as in the right to have services or the right to be in the general education classroom. Families’ discussion about their rights felt like their knowledge of special education rights gave them a sense of empowerment.

The findings in this study that families not only understood their parental special education rights, but also used them to fight for services reflect Trainor's (2010) findings that special education knowledge is critical to obtaining services for Latino families. In another study, Burke, Rios, Garcia, and Magaña (2020) found that Latino families had much less special education knowledge when compared to White families. While this study did not compare the special education knowledge of these families in comparison to White families, this could be a future area of further investigation.

In this study, families' demonstration of empowerment and feeling like they are change-makers can be viewed as advocacy. According to Trainor (2010), parental advocacy for special education services has historically fallen on parents of children with disabilities and while not mentioned, it is implied in IDEA (2004). I found advocacy evident during the focus groups and three out of the four individual interviews that emerged from families' sense of empowerment and dedication to be change-makers for their children. It became apparent to me that a sense of empowerment and advocacy is the clear benefit families have received from the family support group.

**Family Motivation Discussion.** A review of the common motivation of families to engage with the family support group related to the second part of findings for Research Question 2. The common motivations fell into two subcategories: (a) seeking social and emotional support, and (b) seeking information and resources. Exploring the benefits of family support groups provides background knowledge which can be compared to the findings in this study.

***Benefits of support groups.*** Family support groups have been found to be effective in providing families' information and in helping them gain knowledge

(Kingsnorth, Gall, Beayni, & Rigby, 2011) which can help families feel empowered because they feel more able to help their child with a disability (Banach, Iudice, Conway, & Couse, 2010). The findings in this study aligned with the findings that support groups help families by providing information as well as help families feel empowered to help their child with a disability.

Benefits of family support groups can be social support which helps alleviate stress in families who have children with disabilities (Patton, Ware, McPherson, Emerson, & Lennox, 2016; Peer & Hillman, 2014). Family support groups also provide social and emotional support by helping families find acceptance as well as providing opportunities to share experiences and discuss issues (Binford Hopf, Le Grange, Moessner, & Bauer, 2013; Woodgate, Ateah, & Secco, 2008). Furthermore, family support groups can help lessen feelings of isolation and exclusion while also improving confidence and connectedness to others (Klein, Walker, Aumann, Anjose, & Terry, 2019). When narrowed to Latinx families, Latina mothers of children with severe disabilities reported that a support group provided emotional support which felt like a family (Mueller, Milian, & Lopez, 2009). The families in this study did not directly discuss how the family support group helped alleviate stress or lessen feelings of isolation or exclusion but the findings supported how the families in this study valued the family support group for providing a place to share experiences and be heard.

In the next section, a review of the common motivation of families to attend the family support group that fell into two subcategories of (a) seeking social and emotional support and (b) seeking information and resources is discussed and compared to findings in the literature.

**Seeking Social and Emotional Support.** The families' common motivation of seeking social and emotional support in this study was found to fall into three themes of (a) sharing experiences, (b) seeking help, and (c) feelings of safety and trust. All families in this study discussed how they valued the family support group because it provided opportunities to share their experiences and to listen to others' experiences. Families also discussed how they valued being heard by other families in the group. Gloria, Sandy, Mariana, and Girasol all reported that they had joined the group to learn from the experiences of other families. Gloria felt that the family support group because the sharing experience felt like family to her.

Families also saw the support group as a place to go when they needed help and advice. Many families talked in general terms saying that the support group helped them and gave them a lot of support. Additionally, many families' comments indicated a sentiment of trust as well as a sense of safety toward the family support group. These findings that families attended the support group for social and emotional support are similar to the literature on the benefits of support groups (Binford Hopf et al., 2013; Woodgate et al., 2008). Additionally, Gloria's feeling that the support group was like family was also reported in Mueller et al. 's (2009) study of Latinx mothers with disabilities.

***Seeking information and resources.*** The families' common motivation of seeking information and resources in this study fell into four themes: (a) the child's disability and needs, (b) special education program, (c) community resources, and (d) other resources. All the families in the study reported that they attended the family support group because they were seeking information and resources to help themselves as



well as their children. The information and resources mentioned by families were divided in the four interwoven themes of (a) understanding the child's disability and related needs, (b) understanding the special education process and programming, (c) community resources, and (d) other types of information such as insurance and financial resources. Some families also discussed how the information they received from the family support group changed their lives. These findings indicate that the ability of the support group to change these families' lives by providing information and resources is another powerful benefit.

The third area of information and resources that the families discussed was how the group helped them understand special education, mostly in the area of understanding their parental special education rights. I was struck by how families seemed to have a good understanding of their rights because they mentioned their rights often when discussing special education challenges or services during the focus groups and during individual interviews. I realized that I had an assumption that Spanish-speaking families may not understand their special education rights because they are complex, written in legal language, and because, based on my experience, special education staff often gloss over the rights during special education meetings. Based on my experience in contrast with the findings of this study, familial understanding of their special education rights is different than I expected, but it was unclear if that knowledge was provided by the family support group.

The fourth type of information that families mentioned revolved around community resources and other types of information such as information on insurance or how to find other financial support. I feel this is another area where the family support

group fulfills a need that schools may not be able to or willing to fill due to restraints in time to keep abreast of all the resources and financial support available in the community. In addition, based on my experience, special education teams are coached to not refer to outside agencies for additional support because that may infer the school is unable to meet the needs of the child.

The findings that families attended the support group to find information and resources is supported in the literature on the benefits of support groups (Kingsnorth et al., 2011). In addition, the finding that one type of information the families sought was information on their child's disability and related needs was also similar to findings in the literature (Banach et al., 2010).

### **Relationship of Common Motivation Findings to Family Engagement Models**

A review of the findings for Research Question 3 revealed that the findings fell into three categories: (1) family characteristics; (2) issues with special education; and (3) family motivation. These findings were then related to the two research-based models of family engagement discussed in Chapter II. In the next section, I discuss the findings in relation to the Epstein (2010) and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

**Epstein's Spheres of Influence Model.** The common motivation of families to attend the family support group related to Epstein's (2010) Spheres of Influence family engagement framework in the two subcategories of (1) seeking social and emotional support and (2) seeking information and resources. The subcategory of seeking social and emotional support was found to relate to Epstein's underlying concept of caring in the

themes that emerged that included: (a) sharing experiences, (b) seeking help, and (c) feelings of safety and trust. Epstein's concept of caring was noted in families' report that they went to the support group to seek help and advice from the other families and group facilitators. Epstein's concept of caring was also found to relate to the findings because families felt that the support group was a place where they felt safe to discuss their experiences and trust that they would be supported. While all three common motivation themes related to Epstein's concept of caring as an important foundational need in order to build family engagement, it became evident, in contrast, that families distrusted special education staff as discussed by Girasol, Sandy, and Mariana.

The second common motivation found in this study was that families went to the support group because they were seeking information and resources. This finding could relate to four different areas of family engagement in Epstein's framework related to (1) parenting, (2) communication, (3) learning at home, and (4) decision making. All the families reported that they attended the support group meetings because they were looking for information and resources that related to four interwoven themes: (a) understanding child's disability and related needs, (b) understanding the special education process and programming, (c) providing community resources, and (d) providing other types of information such as insurance and financial resources.

Most families talked about the information they were seeking in broad terms while Mariana, Girasol, and Sandy all discussed how they wanted to learn how to better support their child with a disability. Seeking information on a child's disability and related needs corresponded to Epstein's framework in the area of parenting. Epstein's framework in the area of communication related more to the special education issues that

families reported. Families reported they were happy with their child's special education program when teachers communicated with them, while I suspected that many of the issues that families had with special education staff could be linked to staff not communicating well with these families.

The common motivation subcategory of seeking information and resources found in this study related to Epstein's framework in the area of learning at home. Girasol, Sandy, and David discussed how they worked with their child at home on specific special education goals; however, none of the families mentioned that the school staff had given them ideas on how to support their children at home. While this is not conclusive that school staff were not providing ideas, it was not mentioned during the focus groups nor during the individual interviews.

The last area of Epstein's framework that related to the common motivation of seeking information and resources was in the area of decision making. Decision making also related to the issues that Mariana, Girasol, and Sandy had with feeling like their opinions were not heard by the special education staff. The families' dissatisfaction with their child's special education program was discussed in terms of having to fight for services which can relate to not being included in decision making as well. While the findings in this study could relate to parts of Epstein's framework and underlying concept of caring, the findings related more closely to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of family engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) which is discussed in the next section.

**Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model.** The findings of common motivation of families to attend the support group in the subcategories of seeking social and emotional support and seeking information and resources related to three constructs of the Hoover-

Dempsey and Sandler (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) model of family engagement. The three constructs that closely related to the findings were: (1) motivational beliefs and self-efficacy, (2) family's perception of being invited, and (3) life context variables.

*Motivational beliefs and self-efficacy.* Families' motivational beliefs and self-efficacy related to both subcategories of (1) seeking social and emotional support and (2) seeking information and resources. Sandy's, Girasol's, Mariana's, Kokis', and Beck's comments and discussion illustrated that they were actively involved in their child's special education, which indicated they held an active role construction which is part of their motivational beliefs. A few families did not appear to have an active role construction, which was most likely because two of these families had young children who were receiving early intervention services in the home and they were just beginning to learn how to support their child. One mother that was individually interviewed did not appear to view herself as an active participant in her child's education.

The Hoover-Dempsey construct of self-efficacy related to the common motivation findings as well. Self-efficacy describes how the family's beliefs of their own self-efficacy will impact their level of engagement in their child's education (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The discussion about the importance of understanding special education rights that came up during both focus groups and in three of the individual interviews felt empowering to the families. The sense of empowerment that families displayed relates to Hoover-Dempsey's construct of self-efficacy.

I found that self-efficacy is the most powerful aspect that the family support group provides to families because the group helps families develop their belief in their self-efficacy by giving them knowledge and support. The common motivation

subcategories of seeking social and emotional support as well as seeking information and resources directly relates to self-efficacy because families seek support and information so that they can feel more effective in supporting their child's needs. The sense I got that families felt empowered by what they had learned by being part of the support group led them to feel they could bring change to their child's special education program even if their involvement was not welcomed. The findings that the families' feeling of empowerment to actively engage in their child's education is similar to findings by Maríñez-Lora and Quintana (2009) who found in their study of the Hoover-Dempsey model that Latinx families belief in their self-efficacy corresponded with their increased engagement.

*Family's perception of being invited.* The Hoover-Dempsey family engagement construct of the family's perception of being invited related to the findings in the area of school culture and environment (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The Hoover-Dempsey model describes school invitations going beyond the act of being invited to participate to include whether the school has a welcoming, respectful, and responsive climate that ensures families are well informed about their child's education (Green et al., 2007). Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy all expressed their dissatisfaction with the relationship they had at some point in time with their child's special education teacher or the school administration. All these mothers felt they were not welcome at times to visit their child's classroom unannounced, which did not deter them from visiting anyway. In addition, all three of these mothers reported how they did not feel heard by the special education teachers, which does not align with creating a welcoming and supportive school environment in order to foster family engagement. The findings in family's perception of

being invited can relate in some ways to the study by Maríñez-Lora and Quintana (2009) on the Hoover-Dempsey model. Maríñez-Lora and Quintana found that Latinx families' perception that they were invited by the teacher to engage was a powerful predictor of increased Latinx family engagement. However, in this study, despite not feeling welcomed or heard, Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy all reported they still wanted to be engaged in their child's education.

I found the school culture and environment to be an important influence on the motivation of families to attend the family support group because it came up several times during focus groups and individual interviews. My supposition was that because families did not feel welcomed at school, they sought social and emotional support from the family support group as a place where they could discuss such feelings. It must be recognized that the special education team's primary role is to support children with disabilities and collaborate with families in designing an individualized program with less focus on providing social and emotional support for families. However, a welcoming school environment is needed for all families, but especially for diverse families such as the families in this study, because they face barriers of not only not speaking English well but also because they may be new to the U.S. education system and not understand how it works, much less the complicated special education program.

***Life context variables.*** The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model's third construct of family engagement is how engagement can be impacted by life context variables (Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). Life context variables were defined by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) as the family's ability to support their child's education in terms of their skills, knowledge, time, and energy. The families in this study

did not discuss any life context variables that appeared to impede their ability to engage in their child's education. This is an important finding because, in my experience, schools often do not consider the families' availability or transportation needs when scheduling special education meetings or conferences. However, families in this study did not make any comment that they had difficulties in attending school conferences or meetings which could indicate that schools are improving in providing meeting options that work for families. Additionally, the feeling I got during this study was that families made the time to attend the support group meetings, workshops, and yearly conference because it was important to them. In the area of skills and knowledge, the family support group plays a critical role in improving families' skills and knowledge so that they feel more able to engage in their child's special education programming.

### **Relationship of Findings to Family Engagement Recommendations**

A review of the findings for Research Question 4 related to two intersecting family engagement recommendations. They were: (1) culturally responsive practices and (2) indicators of successful collaboration partnerships.

**Culturally responsive practices.** The results of this study related to the five culturally responsive practices that support family engagement that included: (1) focusing on creating and supporting home and school relationships; (2) supporting existing familiar knowledge; (3) distinguishing and employing what works for families; (4) promoting cultural awareness; and (5) developing intellectual, social, and human capital for both families and schools (Lavorgna, 2016; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). I found that the family support group was very successful at fostering relationships with families, which aligns with the culturally responsive practice of focusing on creating and supporting



relationships. Families reported that they attended the support group for social and emotional support, which was reported by families in both focus groups and during individual interviews. This type of support was categorized into three interrelated themes: (a) sharing experiences, (b) seeking help, and (c) safety and trust. However, based on the issues that families had with the special education staff and services, the schools did not appear to always be successful at fostering positive relationships with these families.

The family support group also aligned with the culturally responsive practice of supporting familial knowledge, which was evident because all families reported that they attended the support for information and resources. The information and resources that the families discussed fell into four interwoven themes: (a) understanding the child's disability and related needs, (b) understanding the special education process and programming, (c) community resources, and (d) other types of information such as insurance and financial concerns.

I also found that the family support group aligned with the culturally responsive practice of distinguishing and employing what works for families because I witnessed the facilitators asking families for their input several times on what topics they wanted to learn more about. In addition, the family support group did work to promote cultural awareness, another culturally responsive practice, by inviting special education staff to attend their yearly conference. The group facilitators also allowed other agencies to conduct focus groups that helped these agencies improve their cultural awareness by understanding the needs of these diverse families. Furthermore, I found that the family support group worked to develop intellectual, social, and human capital for families, another culturally responsive practice, by providing a safe place for them to share and

discuss their issues while also providing trainings and workshops. However, the findings did not provide any insight into whether the schools were distinguishing what works for families or if they practiced cultural awareness.

**Collaborative partnerships.** A combination of the five culturally responsive practices with the six indicators of successful collaboration partnerships can improve CLD family participation and engagement in the special education process (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). The findings in this study related to the six indicators of collaborative partnerships areas: (1) communication, (2) commitment, (3) equality, (4) professional competence, (5) mutual trust, and (6) mutual respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). The findings in this study indicated that the family support group practices align with the six indicators of collaborative relationships in the area of communication by providing opportunities for open and honest communication during monthly group discussions. The support group also provides trainings and information on special education so families can understand how special education works, which can help to remove any false familial expectations.

The family support group facilitators exhibited commitment because they demonstrated how they value these families by providing support and trainings all provided on a volunteer basis. In addition, the support group was found to practice equality by providing all families who attend equal opportunities to share their experiences and listen to each other. Professional competence was exhibited by the support group facilitators because they both used their extensive experience in special education to support families and the group brought in speakers who have expertise on different topics. Additionally, the support group was found to instill trust and respect

because the families and facilitators listen to each other when they have issues and need help.

The findings indicated that schools are not always aligning with the six indicators of collaborative partnerships. Communication and commitment concerns were illustrated in the issues that families reported with special education staff and services. These issues related to families not having their opinions heard or feeling like the special education staff was not always meeting the needs of their child. Equity concerns arose when families reported that they did feel like the special education staff listened and acknowledged their opinions during IEP meetings. Concerns in the area of professional competence related to how Girasol felt that the special education staff did not understand her child's needs or how Sandy and Mariana felt that the special education staff was responsible for too many children. Girasol also questioned the competence of the school administration because they did not understand special education rights.

Trust concerns with special education staff came to light in how Girasol, Mariana, and Sandy all felt distrust, which caused them to want to make unannounced visits to their child's classroom in order to ensure their child's needs were being met. Families also indicated a general feeling of distrust because they felt like they had to ask for services to the point of having to fight for services for their child. Families' feeling of not being heard nor welcomed at the school related to lack of respect as well. The findings that schools do not appear to be aligning with the six indicators of collaborative partnerships with some of these families indicates that they are putting up barriers for these families to be able to effectively engage in their child's special education program. Despite schools putting up these barriers, Girasol, Mariana, Sandy, Kokis, and Beck were

not deterred and continued to strive to engage, but in more adversarial manners such as fighting for services or obtaining support from an advocate.

### **Meaning and Significance of the Study**

The results of this study provide valuable insights on the motivations of Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities to become engaged in a family support group. Families were motivated to engage with the family support group because it provides support that families are not finding in the schools, which is similar to Mueller et al.'s (2009) findings. Spanish-speaking families value the family support group as a place where they can find social and emotional support as well as find information and resources, which is similar to the literature on the benefits of support groups (Kingsnorth et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2016; Peer & Hillman, 2014). While schools are not focused on providing social and emotional support for families, these findings provide guidance to special education teams on how to improve motivation for Spanish-speaking families to become more engaged in the special education of their child, which is discussed further in the implications for practice section.

Examination of the practices of the family support group illustrated their alignment with culturally responsive practices (Lavorgna, 2016; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) as well as with the indicators of collaborative partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). The most important aspect of the support group was that it helped families to become empowered and feel like they can make positive changes in their child's special education program. Instilling these powerful familial attributes help remove barriers for CLD family engagement that have been found in previous studies (Rodriguez et al., 2014; Trainor, 2010).

The findings regarding the issues that families reported with special education indicate that schools may be impeding CLD family engagement by not aligning with culturally responsive and collaborative partnership practices. A critical finding of this study was that despite not feeling heard or welcomed by special education staff, families were not deterred in seeking the best for their children. This finding that schools continue to struggle with implementing culturally responsive engagement with CLD families is further concerning because researchers have been recommending implementation of such practices for over a decade (Harry, 2008; Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010).

Several times families discussed how they had to ask for services because they felt that the special education staff was not going to offer them, even if they were available. This feeling of having to ask for services and distrust that their child's needs were not being met led to families taking an adversarial stance illustrated in families often using the word "fight" during the focus groups and individual interviews. Some mothers got to a point of frustration that they enlisted the help of an advocate to obtain appropriate services. An adversarial stance as taken by the families in this study is not surprising when you consider that special education assigns families the role of advocating for services and the special education team as the keeper of the services.

Family disappointment in special education services often occurs because, according to Kotler (2014), families expect special education to provide the best services when often schools and special education staff do not or cannot meet those expectations. While IDEA (2004) mandates that special education services be individualized based on a child's needs, Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple and Jung (2010) examination of special education services found that many IEPs do not provide adequate classroom placement or

services. Spanish-speaking families may feel like they are engaged in a power struggle with the special education team when they believe teams are not forthright about available services (Salas, 2004). Angell and Solomon (2017) described this power struggle as a mismatch that is inherent in the special education system because families are driven to ask for services because they want the best for their child, while special education programming decisions are often constrained by limited financial resources. Angell and Solomon stated that because special education services are driven by the availability of funding, special education staff may be directed to offer only minimal services. This dynamic seems to be difficult to surmount because it sets up the family-school special education relationship to be adversarial for CLD families that cannot be totally avoided even with special education teams aligning with culturally responsive and collaborative partnership practices. However, implementation of such practices holds hope for special education teams to improve their relationships despite the power-struggle dynamic.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings from this study have implications for practice that relate to the findings that Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities were motivated to engage with a family support group because they were: (1) seeking social and emotional support; and (2) seeking information and resources which they were not finding in the schools. The subcategories and themes in each area can provide guidance to special education teams on ways to improve the motivation of Spanish-speaking families to be more engaged in the special education programming for their children. The implications of the motivation of Spanish-speaking families to engage are discussed next.

### **Implications of Motivation Findings**

In the area of seeking social and emotional support, three themes emerged: (1) sharing experiences, (2) seeking help, and (3) feelings of safety and trust. Special education teams can explore ways to establish family support groups within schools where families can have a place where they can share their experiences with other Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities. During individual interviews with Girasol and Sandy, both mothers discussed how they wanted schools to provide family support groups. Another option would be for schools to actively recommend local family support groups. Special education staff can also ensure that they provide opportunities to listen to families' concerns and issues and assist families when they are seeking help. Actions such as listening and providing help can improve families' feeling of trust toward special education staff.

In the area of seeking information and resources, four themes emerged: (1) information about the child's disability and related needs, (2) information about special education programs, (3) information on community resources, and (4) other information such as insurance and other financial resources. These findings provide guidance for special education teams by indicating the importance that they schedule time and a place where teams can discuss in depth a child's disability and related needs as well as provide information about the special education process and programming with Spanish-speaking families. Special education teams can also compile information on local community resources that are available for children with disabilities such as government and private agencies that offer different types of services as well as information on adaptive sports or other types of classes. In this community resource guide, special education teams can also

include information of where to find out about insurance and other sources of financial support to help meet the needs of children with disabilities. In the next section, implications of the findings in relation to using Epstein's (2010) and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) models to improve family engagement.

### **Implications in Relation to Epstein's Family Engagement Model**

Findings from this study indicate the utility of improving Spanish-speaking family engagement using Epstein's Spheres of Influence model (2010). Special education teams can improve family engagement by fostering trust and demonstrating respect, which relates to Epstein's concept of caring. Special education teams can also improve family engagement by focusing on four areas of Epstein's framework that includes (1) parenting, (2) communication, (3) learning at home, and (4) decision making. Special education teams can improve family engagement by providing information on how families can best support the needs of their child with a disability, which relates to the areas of parenting and learning at home in Epstein's framework. Families in this study discussed the issues they had with special education staff and services which led them to feel distrust and feel like they had to fight for services. These findings indicate that special education teams need to improve their communication, another area of Epstein's framework, so that families feel secure that their children's needs are being appropriately supported. Related to the decision-making area in Epstein's framework (2010), families reported not feeling heard during IEP meetings, which indicates that special education teams need to listen to families and involve them in decision-making that is mandated by IDEA (2004).



### **Implications in Relation to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Family Engagement Model**

The findings in the area of families' common motivation related to three constructs of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) model of family engagement that included: (1) motivational beliefs and self-efficacy, (2) family's perception of being invited, and (3) life context variables. The findings indicate that special education teams can utilize the Hoover-Dempsey model to improve Spanish-speaking family engagement.

In this study, several families illustrated their active role construction, viewing themselves as being actively engaged in their child's special education. These families had a sense of empowerment that they could improve their child's special education program. Findings indicated that the family support group helped improve families' self-efficacy by providing them with knowledge and support. Special education teams can utilize this finding in order to improve families' self-efficacy by also providing information and support. Families in this study also reported not feeling heard or welcomed by the special education team, which relates to school culture and environment that is part of the model's perception of being invited. Special education teams can improve CLD family engagement by practicing active listening when speaking with families as well as by paying attention and acknowledging their opinions when discussing a child's present levels or when creating IEP goals.

Special education staff and administration can also improve family engagement by fostering a welcoming school environment where Spanish-speaking families feel welcomed at any time. In the area of life context variables, families in this study made the

time to attend family support group meetings as well as workshops and trainings because they thought it was important. Special education teams can address life context variables for Spanish-speaking families by providing multiple opportunities for families to engage in special education as well as by being sensitive to any constraints that may impede their ability to attend special education meetings such as work or childcare responsibilities.

### **Implications in Relation to Culturally Responsive Practices**

The findings in this study indicated that the family support group aligned well with culturally responsive practices which can provide additional guidance on how special education teams can improve Spanish-speaking families' engagement. Special education teams and administration can support their Spanish-speaking families by addressing and improving their culturally responsive practices in five specific areas: (1) focusing on creating and supporting home and school relationships; (2) supporting existing familiar knowledge; (3) distinguishing and employing what works for families; (4) promoting cultural awareness; and (5) developing intellectual, social, and human capital for both families and schools (Lavorgna, 2016; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013).

The findings indicated that families were motivated to attend the family support group because they were seeking social and emotional support as well as information and resources. Schools can capitalize on these findings by also fostering relationships with their Spanish-speaking families that are built on sharing of information and finding out what works for these families. In addition, these findings indicate the importance of special education teams to continue to improve their cultural awareness by identifying their own biases and seeking to understand their diverse families' cultures. By providing

information and resources while also building positive relationships with Spanish speaking families, special education teams can help families develop their intellectual, social, and human capital, which benefits both the school and the families.

### **Implications in Relation to Collaborative Partnership Indicators**

The findings in this study indicated that the family support group also aligned with the six indicators of collaborative partnerships in specific areas: (1) communication, (2) commitment, (3) equality, (4) professional competence, (5) mutual trust, and (6) mutual respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). Special education teams can use these findings to improve Spanish-speaking family engagement by fostering the six indicators of collaborative partnerships.

The importance of good communication is evident in the findings because families discussed their feeling of distrust toward the special education staff that was most likely because families did not receive enough communication from the special education teacher to make them feel like their child was fully supported. The family support group exhibited commitment to the families by providing support and trainings, which special education teams can do as well. Special education teams can also demonstrate commitment by holding high expectations and ensuring that each child makes progress. Equity can be demonstrated to Spanish-speaking families by taking the time to listen and acknowledge their opinions during IEP meetings. Special education teams can demonstrate professional competence by showing families that they understand each child's needs and how to appropriately support those needs. Administration can demonstrate professional competence by becoming well versed in special education law

as well as in parent and child rights. Trust and respect can be fostered by special education teams by implementing good communication, listening, and showing commitment to the children and the families as well as by demonstrating professional competence.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

The findings in this study provides valuable insights into the motivation of Spanish-speaking families to engage in a family support group and adds to the limited research on motivation in this population. The findings also can help guide special education teams to improve the engagement of their Spanish-speaking families in special education. However, there are limitations that are discussed in this section.

The first limitation of this study was the lack of demographic data on the families. Specific demographic data such as country of origin could have helped understand if this group of participants shared such similarities which would indicate that these findings might relate to other families from the same country. The second limitation in this study was the similarity of the children's disability with most reported by families as having autism and or Down syndrome. Additional studies that included other disabilities could determine if type and severity of disability influences familial motivation to engage. The third limitation was the imbalance of the focus groups and the potential over-representation of one individual's input. One focus group had 3 families and the other had 10 families, which made the groups imbalanced. Due to difficulty in recruiting participants to attend a focus group meeting, the second focus group was conducted during a regularly scheduled family support group meeting. During the second focus group, two mothers who had already been part of the first focus group were also in the

second focus group since it felt awkward to ask them to leave the room during the second focus group.

While care was taken to not overrepresent these two mother's responses in the findings, their presence in both focus groups could have had an impact on the results. Further caution in analysis was needed because Girasol was included in both focus groups and was also one of the families that were interviewed individually. To mitigate her overrepresentation in the analysis, I placed Girasol's comments in a separate area so that I represented her comments and input only one time in the findings; however, her voice is prevalent in the findings, not because she was in both focus groups, but because she was very articulate and had much to say and share. Upon analysis, I found that Girasol's comments were validated by other families in the focus groups as well as in the other individual interviews. Future recommendations to avoid these issues would be to spend more time in recruitment and recruit across several family support groups in order to avoid circumstances where overlap of participation can occur.

The fourth limitation of this study was that due to the difficulty in recruiting participants to be in the focus group, families who had limited experience with special education and with the family support group were included. However, 8 out of 11 of the families in the study had been attending the family support group for at least one year, and 8 had several years of experience with special education. While the diversity in the group could have had an impact on the results, the families were found to have common motivational reasons to attend the family support group.

The fifth limitation of this study was that the participants could be considered already motivated to engage since they were part of a family support group which might

make them unique to other Spanish-speaking families who do not participate in such support groups. The study was limited as an initial investigation of the motivations of this specific group, but the findings can be used to compare to future research on motivation in Spanish-speaking families in different contexts.

### **Future Research**

The findings in this study indicate that further research would benefit our understanding of the motivation of Spanish-speaking families to become engaged. One area would be to further investigate the motivations of other Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities that engage in their child's special education and compare them to other families that do not engage in a school context. Another area for future research is to compare the empowerment that this group demonstrated as a result of their knowledge of special education rights to another group of Spanish speaking families that are not part of a family support group in order to determine if this empowerment arose from a combination of support group influences or was directly related to special education knowledge. The question if cultural differences could be impacting the reason why these families felt distressed at having to ask for special education services is an additional area of future research. Further research is also needed to clarify the role of language differences in causing distrust and dissatisfaction with special education services as was found in this study.

### **Conclusion**

Research has shown that CLD families have difficulty in effectively engaging in their children's special education programming due to cultural and language barriers (Cohen, 2014; Cummins & Hardin, 2017; Hardin et al., 2009; Hee Lee et al., 2018;

Hughes et al., 2002; LeFevre & Shaw, 2012; Park et al., 2001; Salas, 2004; Zarate, 2007), which can result in less engagement (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Wong & Hughes, 2006).

Motivational barriers can also impact CLD families' engagement in their child's education, but there has been limited research in this area (Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012; Shah, 2009; Walker et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study was to gain insights into the motivational reasons of Spanish-speaking families to engage in a family support group. The findings were then related to models and recommendations for family engagement to add to our understanding of how to effectively engage Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities. The results provided guidance to special education teams on how to increase Latinx family motivation to engage in special education in order to improve equity and meet the family participation mandate of IDEA (2004). Participants in this study were 11 Spanish-speaking families who had children with disabilities who participated in focus groups and in individual interviews. The findings fell into three categories: (1) family characteristics, (2) issues with special education, and (3) family motivation.

Family characteristics in this study were identified as families who: (a) were Spanish speaking, (b) have a child with a disability, and (c) attend the family support group. Common family motivational findings related to issues families had with their child's special education staff and services which were explored to better understand how these issues may impact their motivation. Many families expressed dissatisfaction with their child's special education program either currently or in the past which related to three areas: (a) issues with special education staff, (b) issues with special education

services, and (c) feeling like they had to fight for their child's services. Common family motivation results indicated that families sought support and information that they were not finding in the schools which fell into two categories: (a) seeking social and emotional support, and (b) seeking information and resources.

The results were then compared to two different models of family engagement using Epstein's Spheres of Influence (2010) and the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) models. Epstein's model was found to relate to the results of this study in the area of Epstein's underlying concept of caring because the families found the support group as a place where they could share experiences and find help. Families also saw the support group as a place where they felt safe and trusted that they would be heard as well as supported. In addition, families went to the support group to find information and resources which related to four areas of Epstein's framework in parenting, communication, learning at home, and in decision-making. The findings also related to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of family engagement three areas: (1) motivational beliefs and self-efficacy, (2) family's perception of being invited, and (3) life context variables. The family support group's most important role was in helping families feel empowered by gaining knowledge and support, which improved their self-efficacy that they could improve their child's special education program. The families' issues with not feeling heard by the special education team nor feeling welcomed to make unannounced visits related to the construct of the family's perception of being invited in the area of school culture and environment. The families in this study did not mention any life-context variables that impacted their ability to attend the support group meetings



because they appeared to make the time to attend meetings, workshops, and the yearly conference because it was important to them.

The results were also found to relate to recommendations for culturally responsive practices that improve CLD family engagement. The family support group aligned with the five culturally responsive practices: (1) focusing on creating and supporting home and school relationships; (2) supporting existing familiar knowledge; (3) distinguishing and employing what works for families; (4) promoting cultural awareness; and (5) developing intellectual, social, and human capital for both families and schools (Lavorgna, 2016; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The results indicated that schools were not implementing culturally responsive practices. The family support group was also found to align with the six indicators of collaborative partnerships in these areas: (1) communication, (2) commitment, (3) equality, (4) professional competence, (5) mutual trust, and (6) mutual respect (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Rossetti et al., 2017). While the family support group was found to align with these six indicators, the schools did not.

The results of this study provided valuable insights on the motivational reasons why Spanish-speaking families who have children with disabilities choose to engage in a family support group. Spanish-speaking families valued the family support group as a place where they could find support and gain knowledge that they are not finding in the schools. The issues families had with special education indicated that schools struggle with implementing culturally responsive practices and indicators of collaborative practices, which led to families taking an adversarial stance or feeling like they had to fight for their child's services. The way that special education is designed leads to families being placed in an adversarial role because families want what is best for their

child, while special education teams may only offer the minimum of services. Special education teams may also be limited by funding to offer services to adequately meet a child's needs (Kotler, 2014). This adversarial dynamic may be hard to overcome; however, special education teams can improve their relationships with families by offering support and information. Special education teams can also foster family engagement and positive relationships by frequently communicating with families and actively listening to families' concerns and opinions as well as demonstrating commitment to their child's progress, which will, in turn, instill much needed trust. It is critical that special education teams align with culturally responsive practices and indicators of collaborative partnerships in order to improve equity for CLD families as well as comply with the family participation mandate of IDEA (2004).

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APPENDIX A  
PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE





*Institutional Review Board*

Participant Questionnaire  
*Cuestionario del participante*

1. Gender/*el genero*:
2. What is your primary home language?/ *¿Cuál es su lengua materna principal?*
3. How well do you understand English?/ *¿Qué tan entiende el inglés?*
4. How well do you speak English?/ *¿Qué tan habla usted inglés?*
5. Do you have a child identified with a disability?/ *¿Tiene un niño identificado con una discapacidad?*
6. What disability is your child identified with?/ *¿Con qué discapacidad se identifica a su hijo?*
7. How old is your child identified with a disability?/ *¿Qué edad tiene su hijo identificado con una discapacidad?*
8. When was your child identified with a disability?/ *¿Cuándo se identificó a su hijo con una discapacidad?*
9. When did you child start receiving special education services?/ *¿Cuándo comenzó su hijo a recibir servicios de educación especial?*
10. What type of special education support does your child receive?/ *¿Qué tipo de apoyo de educación especial recibe su hijo?*
11. Do you attend the Spanish Family Support Group?/ *¿Asiste al grupo de apoyo familiar español?*
12. When did you start attending the support group meetings?/ *¿Cuándo comenzó a asistir a las reuniones del grupo de apoyo?*

13. How often do you attend the support group meetings?/ *¿Con qué frecuencia asiste a las reuniones del grupo de apoyo?*

APPENDIX B  
FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP EMAIL



*Institutional Review Board*

## Spanish-Speaking Family Support Group Email

Re: seeking parent volunteers for research project

Tue 1/8/2019 4:20 PM

To: Rasmussen, Sandra <rasm8065@bears.unco.edu>; [REDACTED]

Dear Sandra,

Thanks for contact us. We have a support group the second Saturday of every month in children's hospital, [REDACTED]:00pm. You are welcome to talk about your dissertation. Also, we have Facebook page that we can post the information. I added [REDACTED] this email. He is one of the leader of the support group.

Thanks,  
[REDACTED]

On Jan 8, 2019 at 1:27 PM, <[Sandra Rasmussen](#)> wrote:

Dear [REDACTED]

I am a doctoral student at University of Northern Colorado and am looking for Spanish speaking parents who would be willing to take part in my doctoral research on Spanish-speaking parents engagement in special education of their child. My question to you is whether I could advertise for parents through a newsletter or website? Or would I be able to attend a meeting to let parents know about my research project?

I am interested in finding out what makes some Spanish-speaking parents more engaged than others in order to help special education teachers improve their ability to support such parents.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sandy Rasmussen  
Doctoral Student  
University of Northern Colorado

APPENDIX C  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
APPROVAL LETTER



*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: August 1, 2019

TO: Sandra Rasmussen, Doctoral Student  
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1473830-2] CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATION OF SPANISH-SPEAKING LATINX FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES ENGAGED IN A FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: August 1, 2019

EXPIRATION DATE: August 1, 2023

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or [nicole.morse@unco.edu](mailto:nicole.morse@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

APPENDIX D  
OBSERVATION CONSENT FORM



*Institutional Review Board*

**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPATIONS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**

Project Title: COMMON CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATION OF SPANISH-SPEAKING LATINX FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES ENGAGED IN A FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP

Researcher:	Sandra Rasmussen, Doctoral Student	
Phone:	970-420-4075	Email: rasm8065@bears.unco.edu
Research Advisor:	Dr. Sandy Bowen	
Phone:	970-351-2102	Email: sandy.bowen@unco.edu
Research Advisor:	Dr. Silvia Correa-Torres	
Phone:	970-351-1660	Email: silvia.correa-torres@unco.edu

I am a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado, and I am researching the common characteristics and motivation of Spanish-speaking families who have children with a disability and who choose to engage with a family support group. My goal is to provide new insights on how to improve family engagement of Spanish-speaking families in special education. With your verbal permission, I would like to observe your support group meeting. You are asked to verbally give your consent by saying individually “yes” or “no”. I will take notes during my observation regarding the setting, participants, activities, interactions, conversations, other subtle factors such as body language as well as reflective notes regarding what I notice and thoughts that relate to my research questions. I will be writing notes regarding the different topics discussed during the meeting, the general themes that emerge during each topic’s discussion and individual reactions.

There are minimal risks for this study. Participants may experience some psychological discomfort because of being observed, therefore, counseling services resources will be provided as needed. While participants do not directly benefit from participation in the study, an indirect benefit will be the knowledge that you have participated in a study that will benefit the field of special education and support for Spanish-speaking families by investigating and learning about your experiences with special education and with the family support group. This research will be used to inform special educators on strategies they can use to increase culturally and linguistically diverse family collaboration and engagement with special education teams.

You will be participating in an observation that should last for one hour. I will be taking notes which will become part of my research study. All notes will be kept in a locked cabinet in a locked room. All identifiable data, including recordings and consent forms,



will be destroyed three years after the study is completed. Your name will not be used when sharing information learned through the observation. Only the researchers and the research advisors will have access to the data.

Please feel free to contact Sandra Rasmussen, Dr. Sandy Bowen, or Dr. Silvia Correa-Torres via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns about the study. Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference.

If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall 0025, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, 80639: 970-351-1910.

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Number of Verbal “Yes” Responses Date

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Number of Verbal “No” Responses Date

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Researcher’s Signature Date



*Institutional Review Board*

**FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO PARA PARTICIPACIONES HUMANAS  
EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN UNIVERSIDAD DE COLORADO NORTE**

Título del proyecto: Características comunes y motivación de las familias hispanohablantes latinx involucradas en un grupo de apoyo a la discapacidad infantil.

Investigador(a): Sandra Rasmussen, Estudiante de doctorado

Teléfono: 970-420-4075

Correo electrónico: [rasm8065@bears.unco.edu](mailto:rasm8065@bears.unco.edu)

Asesor de investigación: Dr. Sandy Bowen

Teléfono: 970-351-2102

Correo electrónico: [sandy.bowen@unco.edu](mailto:sandy.bowen@unco.edu)

Asesor de investigación: Dr. Silvia Correa-Torres

Teléfono: 970-351-1660

Correo electrónico: [silvia.correatorres@unco.edu](mailto:silvia.correatorres@unco.edu)

Soy un estudiante de doctorado en la Universidad del Norte de Colorado, y estoy investigando las características comunes y la motivación de las familias de habla hispana que tienen hijos con discapacidad y que eligen involucrarse con un grupo de apoyo familiar. Mi objetivo es proporcionar nuevas ideas sobre cómo mejorar la participación familiar de las familias de habla hispana en la educación especial. Con su permiso verbal, me gustaría observar su reunión del grupo de apoyo. Se le pide que dé su consentimiento verbalmente diciendo individualmente "sí" o "no". Tomaré notas durante mi observación sobre el entorno, los participantes, las actividades, las interacciones, las conversaciones, otros factores sutiles, como el lenguaje corporal, así como las notas reflexivas sobre lo que noto y los pensamientos relacionados con mis preguntas de investigación. Escribiré notas sobre los diferentes temas discutidos durante la reunión, los temas generales que surgen durante la discusión de cada tema y las reacciones individuales.

Hay riesgos mínimos para este estudio. Los participantes pueden experimentar algunas molestias psicológicas debido a que el tema de conflicto o insatisfacción puede surgir durante nuestra entrevista, por lo tanto, se proporcionarán recursos de asesoramiento según sea necesario. Si bien los participantes no se benefician directamente de la participación en el estudio, un beneficio indirecto será el conocimiento de que ha participado en un estudio que beneficiará el campo de la educación especial y el apoyo para las familias de habla hispana al investigar y conocer sus experiencias con educación y con el grupo de apoyo familiar. Esta investigación se utilizará para informar a los educadores especiales sobre las estrategias que pueden utilizar para aumentar la colaboración familiar y el compromiso cultural y lingüístico con los equipos de educación especial. Soy un estudiante de doctorado en la Universidad del Norte de Colorado, y estoy investigando las características comunes y la motivación de las familias de habla hispana que tienen hijos con discapacidad y que eligen involucrarse con

un grupo de apoyo familiar. Mi objetivo es proporcionar nuevas ideas sobre cómo mejorar la participación familiar de las familias de habla hispana en la educación especial. Con su permiso verbal, me gustaría observar su reunión del grupo de apoyo. Se le pide que dé su consentimiento verbalmente diciendo individualmente "sí" o "no". Tomaré notas durante mi observación sobre el entorno, los participantes, las actividades, las interacciones, las conversaciones, otros factores sutiles, como el lenguaje corporal, así como las notas reflexivas sobre lo que noto y los pensamientos relacionados con mis preguntas de investigación. Escribiré notas sobre los diferentes temas discutidos durante la reunión, los temas generales que surgen durante la discusión de cada tema y las reacciones individuales.

Participará en una observación que debería durar una hora. Tomaré notas que formarán parte de mi estudio de investigación. Todas las notas se guardarán en un armario cerrado en una habitación cerrada. Todos los datos identificables, incluidas las grabaciones y los formularios de consentimiento, se destruirán tres años después de que se complete el estudio. Su nombre no se usará cuando comparta información aprendida a través de la observación. Solo los investigadores y los asesores de investigación tendrán acceso a los datos.

No dude en comunicarse con Sandra Rasmussen, la Dra. Sandy Bowen o la Dra. Silvia Correa-Torres por teléfono o correo electrónico si tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud sobre el estudio. La participación es voluntaria. Puede decidir no participar en este estudio y si comienza a participar, aún puede decidir detenerse y retirarse en cualquier momento. Su decisión será respetada y no dará lugar a la pérdida de los beneficios a los que tiene derecho. Después de haber leído lo anterior y haber tenido la oportunidad de hacer cualquier pregunta, firme a continuación si desea participar en esta investigación. Se le entregará una copia de este formulario para que la guarde para futuras referencias.

Si tiene alguna inquietud sobre su selección o tratamiento como participante en una investigación, comuníquese con Nicole Morse, Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall 0025, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, 80639: 970-351-1910.

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Número de respuestas verbales "Sí"	Fecha
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Número de respuestas verbales "No"	Fecha
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Firma del investigador	Fecha
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APPENDIX E  
FOCUS GROUP CONSENT FORM



*Institutional Review Board*

**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPATIONS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**

Project Title: COMMON CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATION OF SPANISH-SPEAKING LATINX FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES ENGAGED IN A FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP

Researcher:	Sandra Rasmussen, Doctoral Student	
Phone:	970-420-4075	Email: rasm8065@bears.unco.edu
Research Advisor:	Dr. Sandy Bowen	
Phone:	970-351-2102	Email: sandy.bowen@unco.edu
Research Advisor:	Dr. Silvia Correa-Torres	
Phone:	970-351-1660	Email: silvia.correa-torres@unco.edu

I am a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado, and I am researching the common characteristics and motivation of Spanish-speaking families who have children with a disability and who choose to engage with a family support group. My goal is to provide new insights on how to improve family engagement of Spanish-speaking families in special education. With your permission, I would like to interview you about your special education and family support group experiences.

There are minimal risks for this study. Participants may experience some psychological discomfort because the subject of conflict or dissatisfaction may arise during our interview, therefore, counseling services resources will be provided as needed. While participants do not directly benefit from participation in the study, an indirect benefit will be the knowledge that you have participated in a study that will benefit the field of special education and support for Spanish-speaking families by investigating and learning about your experiences with special education and with the family support group. This research will be used to inform special educators on strategies they can use to increase culturally and linguistically diverse family collaboration and engagement with special education teams.

You will be participating in a focus group interview that should last about 45 minutes to one hour. You will respond to questions asked by the researcher and respond to participants comments made during a group conversation. You will be asked questions about your experiences with special education and with the family support group. You may also be asked to review the results to see if you agree with the findings. The focus group interview will be audio recorded for the purpose of allowing me to correctly report the information; however, transcripts of the interview will be confidential. A note taker will be present at the focus group whose main purpose is to take notes on general themes

that emerge during each question, important comments that participants make, as well as body language and emotions that individuals demonstrate during each question. All audio recordings, notes, and transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in a locked room. All identifiable data, including recordings and consent forms, will be destroyed three years after the study is completed. Your name will not be used when sharing information learned through the interview(s) with your results represented by a pseudonym of your choosing. Only the researchers and the research advisors will have access to the data. Upon completion, you will receive a \$20.00 gift card to a local retail store in appreciation for your time.

Please feel free to contact Sandra Rasmussen, Dr. Sandy Bowen, or Dr. Silvia Correa-Torres via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns about the study. Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference.

If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall 0025, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, 80639: 970-351-1910.

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Participant's Signature

Date

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Researcher's Signature

Date



FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO PARA PARTICIPACIONES HUMANAS  
EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN UNIVERSIDAD DE COLORADO NORTE

Título del proyecto: Características comunes y motivación de las familias  
hispanohablantes

Latinx involucradas en un grupo de apoyo a la discapacidad infantil.

Investigador(a):	Sandra Rasmussen, Estudiante de doctorado
Teléfono:	970-420-4075
Correo electrónico:	<a href="mailto:rasm8065@bears.unco.edu">rasm8065@bears.unco.edu</a>
Asesor de investigación:	Dr. Sandy Bowen
Teléfono:	970-351-2102
Correo electrónico:	<a href="mailto:sandy.bowen@unco.edu">sandy.bowen@unco.edu</a>
Asesor de investigación:	Dr. Silvia Correa-Torres
Teléfono:	970-351-1660
Correo electrónico:	<a href="mailto:silvia.correatorres@unco.edu">silvia.correatorres@unco.edu</a>

Soy un estudiante de doctorado en la Universidad del Norte de Colorado, y estoy investigando las características comunes y la motivación de las familias hispanohablantes que tienen niños con discapacidades y que deciden participar en un grupo de apoyo familiar. Mi objetivo es proporcionar nuevas perspectivas sobre cómo mejorar el compromiso familiar de las familias que hablan español en educación especial. Con su permiso, me gustaría entrevistarle sobre sus experiencias en educación especial y en grupos de apoyo familiar.

Hay riesgos mínimos para este estudio. Los participantes pueden experimentar algunas molestias psicológicas debido a que el tema de conflicto o insatisfacción puede surgir durante nuestra entrevista, por lo tanto, se proporcionarán recursos de asesoramiento según sea necesario. Si bien los participantes no se benefician directamente de la participación en el estudio, un beneficio indirecto será el conocimiento de que ha participado en un estudio que beneficiará el campo de la educación especial y el apoyo para las familias de habla hispana al investigar y conocer sus experiencias con educación y con el grupo de apoyo familiar. Esta investigación se utilizará para informar a los educadores especiales sobre las estrategias que pueden utilizar para aumentar la colaboración familiar y el compromiso cultural y lingüístico con los equipos de educación especial.

Participará en una entrevista de grupo focal que debería durar entre 45 minutos y una hora. Responderá a las preguntas formuladas por el investigador y responderá a los comentarios de los participantes realizados durante una conversación grupal. Se le harán

preguntas sobre sus experiencias con la educación especial y con el grupo de apoyo familiar. También se le puede pedir que revise los resultados para ver si está de acuerdo con los resultados. La entrevista del grupo focal se grabará en audio con el fin de permitirme informar correctamente la información; sin embargo, las transcripciones de la entrevista serán confidenciales. Un tomador de notas estará presente en el grupo de enfoque cuyo propósito principal es tomar notas sobre temas generales que surgen durante cada pregunta, comentarios importantes que hacen los participantes, así como el lenguaje corporal y las emociones que las personas demuestran durante cada pregunta. Todas las grabaciones de audio, notas y transcripciones se guardarán en un gabinete cerrado en una habitación cerrada. Todos los datos identificables, incluidas las grabaciones y los formularios de consentimiento, se destruirán tres años después de que se complete el estudio. Su nombre no se usará cuando comparta información aprendida a través de la (s) entrevista (s) con sus resultados representados por un seudónimo de su elección. Solo los investigadores y los asesores de investigación tendrán acceso a los datos. Al finalizar, recibirá una tarjeta de regalo de \$ 20.00 en una tienda minorista local en agradecimiento por su tiempo.

No dude en comunicarse con Sandra Rasmussen, la Dra. Sandy Bowen o la Dra. Silvia Correa-Torres por teléfono o correo electrónico si tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud sobre el estudio. La participación es voluntaria. Puede decidir no participar en este estudio y si comienza a participar, aún puede decidir detenerse y retirarse en cualquier momento. Su decisión será respetada y no dará lugar a la pérdida de los beneficios a los que tiene derecho. Después de haber leído lo anterior y haber tenido la oportunidad de hacer cualquier pregunta, firme a continuación si desea participar en esta investigación. Se le entregará una copia de este formulario para que la guarde para futuras referencias.

Si tiene alguna inquietud sobre su selección o tratamiento como participante en una investigación, comuníquese con Nicole Morse, Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall 0025, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, 80639: 970-351-1910.

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Firma del participante

Fecha

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Firma del investigador(a)

Fecha



APPENDIX F  
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS



### Focus Group Questions

#### Opening Question

- 1) How have you been involved in special education?/ *¿Cómo ha estado involucrado en la educación especial?*

#### Introductory Questions

- 2) Think back over all of your experiences in special education and tell us about your best experience./ *Piense en todas sus experiencias en educación especial y cuéntenos sobre su mejor experiencia.*
  - a) What specifically went well?/ *¿Qué fue específicamente bien?*
- 3) What did not go well?/ *¿Qué no salió bien?*
- 4) How do you feel about your child's special education services/support?/ *¿Cómo se siente acerca de los servicios / apoyo de educación especial de su hijo?*
  - a) Explain more as needed.
- 5) Share with us how you believe you engage in your child's education?/ *¿Comparta con nosotros cómo cree que participa en la educación de su hijo?*

#### Transition Questions

- 6) If you were in charge of the special education program at your child's school, what is one change you would make to improve the program?/ *Si estuviera a cargo del programa de educación especial en la escuela de su hijo, ¿qué cambio haría para mejorar el programa?*
  - a) What can each of us do to make the program better?/ *¿Qué podemos hacer cada uno de nosotros para mejorar el programa?*

#### Key Questions

- 7) Think back about when you first heard about the family support group and tell us why you decided to come to meetings./ *Piense en la primera vez que escuchó sobre el grupo de apoyo familiar y cuéntenos por qué decidió asistir a las reuniones.*
- 8) How has the family support group helped you as a parent of a child with a disability?/ *¿Cómo le ha ayudado el grupo de apoyo familiar como padre de un niño con una discapacidad?*
  - a) What have you learned from the family support group?/ *¿Qué ha aprendido del grupo de apoyo familiar?*
  - b) What has been the most helpful?/ *¿Qué ha sido lo más útil?*
- 9) How do you feel about the family support group?/ *¿Cómo se siente acerca del grupo de apoyo familiar?*
- 10) How is the family support group experience different than your experiences with special education?/ *¿En qué se diferencia la experiencia del grupo de apoyo familiar de sus experiencias con la educación especial?*

- 11) Tell us how your experience with the family support group could help special education teachers./ *Cuéntenos cómo su experiencia con el grupo de apoyo familiar podría ayudar a los maestros de educación especial.*
- a) How could special education teachers make you feel \_\_\_\_? (taken from group input such as, make you feel included, respected, etc.)/ *¿Cómo podrían los maestros de educación especial hacerse sentir \_\_\_\_?*

Ending Questions

- 12) Of all the things we talked about today, what to you is the most important?/ *De todas las cosas de las que hablamos hoy, ¿cuál es para Usted lo más importante?*
- 13) After summarizing the group's discussion, ask "Is this an adequate summary?"/ *¿Es este un resumen adecuado?*
- 14) Final question, review the purpose of the study and ask
- a) Have we missed anything?/ *¿Nos hemos perdido algo?*

APPENDIX G  
NOTE TAKER RECORDING FORM



## Focus Group Note Taker Recording Form

Questions	Key Quotes	Key Points, Big Ideas	Non-Verbal (body language, passionate comments, head nods, eye contact)
1. How have you been involved in special education?			
1. Think back over all of your experiences in special education and tell us about your best experience. a. What specifically went well? b. What did not go well?			
2. Share with us how you believe you engage in your child's education?/			
3. How do you feel about your child's special education services/support? a. Explain more as needed.			
4. If you were in charge of the special education program at your child's school, what is one change you would make to improve the program? a. What can each of us do to make the program better?			
5. Think back about when you first heard about the family support group and tell us why you decided to come to meetings.			
6. How has the family support group helped you as a parent of a child with a disability?			

<p>a. What have you learned from the family support group?</p> <p>b. What has been the most helpful?</p> <p>c. How do you feel about the family support group?</p>			
<p>7. How is the family support group experience different than your experiences with special education?</p>			
<p>8. Tell us how your experience with the family support group could help special education teachers.</p> <p>a) How could special education teachers make you feel ____? (taken from group input such as, make you feel included, respected, etc.)</p>			
<p>9. Of all the things we talked about today, what to you is the most important?</p>			
<p>10. After summarizing the group's discussion, ask "Is this an adequate summary?"</p>			
<p>11. Final question, review the purpose of the study and ask</p> <p>a. Have we missed anything?</p>			

APPENDIX H  
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM



**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPATIONS IN RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**



Project Title: COMMON CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATION OF SPANISH-SPEAKING LATINX FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES ENGAGED IN A FAMILY SUPPORT GROUP

Researcher:	Sandra Rasmussen, Doctoral Student	
Phone:	970-420-4075	Email: rasm8065@bears.unco.edu
Research Advisor:	Dr. Sandy Bowen	
Phone:	970-351-2102	Email: sandy.bowen@unco.edu
Research Advisor:	Dr. Silvia Correa-Torres	
Phone:	970-351-1660	Email: silvia.correa-torres@unco.edu

I am a doctoral student at the University of Northern Colorado, and I am researching the common characteristics and motivation of Spanish-speaking families who have children with a disability and who choose to engage with a family support group. My goal is to provide new insights on how to improve family engagement of Spanish-speaking families in special education. With your permission, I would like to interview you about your special education and family support group experiences.

There are minimal risks for this study. Participants may experience some psychological discomfort because the subject of conflict or dissatisfaction may arise during our interview, therefore, counseling services resources will be provided as needed. While participants do not directly benefit from participation in the study, an indirect benefit will be the knowledge that you have participated in a study that will benefit the field of special education and support for Spanish-speaking families by investigating and learning about your experiences with special education and with the family support group. This research will be used to inform special educators on strategies they can use to increase culturally and linguistically diverse family collaboration and engagement with special education teams.

You will be participating in an individual interview that should last about 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews can take place at your home, at a local meeting place, or by phone. You will be asked to share about your experiences with special education and with the family support group. I will be taking some short notes during the interview regarding important comments you make and when are silent or laugh or feel strong emotion about a topic. You may also be asked to review the results to see if you agree with the findings.



The interview will be audio recorded for the purpose of allowing me to correctly report the information; however, transcripts of the interview will be confidential. All audio recordings, notes, and transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet in a locked room. All identifiable data, including recordings and consent forms, will be destroyed three years after the study is completed. Your name will not be used when sharing information learned through the interview(s) with your results represented by a pseudonym of your choosing. Only the researchers and the research advisors will have access to the data. Upon completion, you will receive a \$20.00 gift card to a local retail store in appreciation for your time.

Please feel free to contact Sandra Rasmussen, Dr. Sandy Bowen, or Dr. Silvia Correa-Torres via phone or email if you have any questions or concerns about the study. Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference.

If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall 0025, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, 80639: 970-351-1910.

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 Participant's Signature

Date

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 Researcher's Signature

Date



FORMULARIO DE CONSENTIMIENTO PARA PARTICIPACIONES HUMANAS  
EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN UNIVERSIDAD DE COLORADO NORTE

Título de proyecto: Características comunes y motivación de las familias hispanohablantes  
Latinx involucradas en un grupo de apoyo a la discapacidad infantil.

Investigador(a):	Sandra Rasmussen, Estudiante de doctorado
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Soy un estudiante de doctorado en la Universidad del Norte de Colorado, y estoy investigando las características comunes y la motivación de las familias hispanohablantes que tienen niños con discapacidades y que deciden participar en un grupo de apoyo familiar. Mi objetivo es proporcionar nuevas perspectivas sobre cómo mejorar el compromiso familiar de las familias que hablan español en educación especial. Con su permiso, me gustaría entrevistarle sobre sus experiencias en educación especial y en grupos de apoyo familiar.

Hay riesgos mínimos para este estudio. Los participantes pueden experimentar algunas molestias psicológicas debido a que el tema de conflicto o insatisfacción puede surgir durante nuestra entrevista, por lo tanto, se proporcionarán recursos de asesoramiento según sea necesario. Si bien los participantes no se benefician directamente de la participación en el estudio, un beneficio indirecto será el conocimiento de que ha participado en un estudio que beneficiará el campo de la educación especial y el apoyo para las familias de habla hispana al investigar y conocer sus experiencias con educación y con el grupo de apoyo familiar. Esta investigación se utilizará para informar a los educadores especiales sobre las estrategias que pueden utilizar para aumentar la colaboración familiar y el compromiso cultural y lingüístico con los equipos de educación especial.

Usted participará en una entrevista de grupo focal que debe durar entre 45 minutos y una hora y una entrevista de seguimiento puede programarse en persona o por teléfono. También se le puede pedir que revise los resultados para ver si está de acuerdo con los hallazgos. La (s) entrevista (s) se grabarán en audio con el propósito de permitirme informar correctamente la información; Sin embargo, las transcripciones de la entrevista

serán confidenciales. Todas las grabaciones de audio y las transcripciones se guardarán en un gabinete cerrado con llave en una habitación cerrada. Todos los datos identificables, incluidas las grabaciones y los formularios de consentimiento, se destruirán tres años después de que se complete el estudio. Su nombre no se utilizará cuando comparta la información obtenida a través de la (s) entrevista (s) con sus resultados representados por un seudónimo de su elección. Solo los investigadores y los asesores de investigación tendrán acceso a los datos. Al finalizar, recibirá una tarjeta de regalo de \$ 20.00 en una tienda minorista local en agradecimiento por su tiempo.

No dude en comunicarse con Sandra Rasmussen, la Dra. Sandy Bowen o la Dra. Silvia Correa-Torres por teléfono o correo electrónico si tiene alguna pregunta o inquietud sobre el estudio. La participación es voluntaria. Puede decidir no participar en este estudio y si comienza a participar, aún puede decidir detenerse y retirarse en cualquier momento. Su decisión será respetada y no dará lugar a la pérdida de los beneficios a los que tiene derecho. Después de haber leído lo anterior y haber tenido la oportunidad de hacer cualquier pregunta, firme a continuación si desea participar en esta investigación. Se le entregará una copia de este formulario para que la guarde para futuras referencias.

Si tiene alguna inquietud sobre su selección o tratamiento como participante en una investigación, comuníquese con Sherry May, Administradora del IRB en Attn: Nicole Morse, Oficina de Programas Patrocinados, 25 Kepner Hall, Universidad del Norte de Colorado, Greeley, CO, 80639; 970-351-1910.

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Firma del participante

Fecha

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Firma del investigador(a)

Fecha

APPENDIX I  
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE



Individual Interview Guide (Adams, 2015)

- 1) Establish rapport
  - a) How do you like living in Denver?/ *¿Cómo le gusta vivir en Denver?*
  - b) What activities do you like to do with your child/children?/ *¿Qué actividades te gusta hacer con tu hijo / hijos?*
  
- 2) You talked about your experiences with special education during our group session. Can you tell me more about that experience?/ *Habló sobre sus experiencias con la educación especial durante nuestra sesión de grupo. ¿Me puedes contar más sobre esa experiencia?*
  - a) Have your experiences been good? Why?/ *¿Sus experiencias han sido buenas? ¿Por qué?*
  - b) Or- How was the experience positive for you?/ *¿Cómo fue la experiencia positiva para Usted?*
  - c) What has not worked well for you? Why? / *¿Lo que no ha funcionado bien para usted? ¿Por qué?*
  - d) What could have been done differently to improve your experience?/ *¿Qué se podría haber hecho de manera diferente para mejorar su experiencia?*
  
- 3) We also discussed the family support group at our last meeting. Are there any reasons that you go the support group meetings that you did not share with the group?/ *También hablamos sobre el grupo de apoyo familiar en nuestra última*

- reunión. ¿Hay alguna razón por la que asiste a las reuniones del grupo de apoyo que no compartió con el grupo?*
- 4) What makes the family support group special to you?/*¿Qué hace que el grupo de apoyo familiar sea especial para Usted?*
  - 5) What is the best thing you have gotten from the family support meetings?/*¿Qué es lo mejor que ha recibido de las reuniones de apoyo familiar?*
  - 6) Do you plan on continuing to attend the family support group meetings?/*¿Planea continuar asistiendo a las reuniones del grupo de apoyo familiar?*
    - a) Why?/*¿Por qué?*
  - 7) What other types of support do you need?/*¿Qué otros tipos de apoyo necesita?*
    - a) Is this something the support group can help with?/*¿Es esto algo en lo que el grupo de apoyo puede ayudar?*
    - b) Is this something the special education teacher can help with?/*¿Es esto algo con lo que el maestro de educación especial puede ayudar?*
  8. Do you think special education teachers could learn something from the family support group?/*¿Cree que los maestros de educación especial podrían aprender algo del grupo de apoyo familiar?*
    - a) What could they learn?/*¿Qué podrían aprender?*
    - b) Would that improve experiences for Spanish-speaking families?/*¿Eso mejoraría las experiencias para las familias que hablan español?*
  9. What else would you like to share with me regarding what we have talked about?/*¿Qué más le gustaría compartir conmigo sobre lo que hemos hablado?*