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Predictors of Involvement in Head Start Services Among Diverse Immigrant Families

Introduction

Involvement in a child's education, as early as preschool, has been shown to produce positive gains for children throughout their schooling and into adulthood.¹⁻³ These positive gains are even more pronounced in families with immigrant parents.⁴ In low-income families, encouraging family involvement in education is often at odds with busy schedules that may include multiple jobs and meetings with social service providers. Low-income immigrant families may face additional barriers to involvement, including cultural conflicts and language barriers.⁵⁻⁷ In an effort to encourage family involvement in Head Start services among diverse immigrant families, this study provides an exploration into variables associated with involvement. Specifically, this study examines the question: *Are immigrant parents and caregivers different from US-born parents and caregivers in predictors of involvement in Head Start services?*

Underscoring research on family involvement in early education is the pivotal role of family involvement in Head Start services. Head Start preschools provide a 2-generation approach to education that necessitates a high level of involvement on behalf of families.⁸ Families with children enrolled in Head Start typically work with a social worker at the same Head Start preschool where children receive health and education services. This model of early childhood education allows Head Start to work effectively with under-resourced families and provides a more holistic educational experience for children. However, this model of education can be effective only when families are highly involved. Head Start has been shown to produce academic gains in children before they enter the K-12 education system.⁹ Those benefits appear to be significantly more pronounced in English language learner families when compared to native English-speaking families.⁴

Immigrant Family Involvement in Head Start

Examining immigrant family involvement in education is an inherently challenging question, given the exceptional number of confounding variables. For example, the circumstances under which the family immigrated, socioeconomic status, neighborhood, and social supports weigh heavily on a family's level of involvement in education.¹⁰⁻¹¹ Much of the current literature examining family involvement in education among

diverse communities fails to control for the inextricable relationship between immigration, ethnicity, and socioeconomic factors.¹² Rather, much research has been done examining how language and cultural barriers impact a family's, or specifically parents', level of involvement in their child's education.^{10,13-14}

Immigrant family involvement in Head Start specifically has received little attention in the literature. Research on immigrant family involvement in Head Start services has focused on one immigrant group at a time, often highlighting the unique needs of specific immigrant groups. For example, McWayne et al¹³ examined family involvement in Head Start services among Latino families and found that many Latino families conceptualize education as a broader, more encompassing idea. Thus, the authors argued that involvement in education services among Latino families must encompass more life skills and community-based activities. Although specific immigrant community examinations like this are valuable, many, if not most, Head Start preschools serve multiple immigrant groups in the same classroom.

Head Start officials have noted their struggles in engaging immigrant families in services.¹⁵ As this population grows, an increasing number of immigrant children and the children of immigrants face challenges to school readiness before entering the US public education system. Language and cultural barriers, in addition to parents who are more likely to have lower educational attainment themselves, put higher barriers in front of children in immigrant families.¹⁶ Families emigrating from around the world come to the US with a variety of experiences from their home country and their home country's education system. Globalization and global capitalism have created vastly unequal opportunities for high-quality formal education in low- and middle-income countries, a factor which often pushes families to consider migrating to high-income countries.¹⁷ Coming from different education systems creates challenges for families seeking to enroll their children in the US education system. However, Head Start has been shown to ease some of those struggles through significant gains in school readiness for children in immigrant families before entering the US public education system.⁴

Beyond school readiness, family involvement in Head Start services also provides social services for parents and caregivers. According to Head Start guidelines, families enrolled in Head Start must be below an income cap. Therefore, immigrant families in Head Start are,

by definition, low-income families and often have a number of social service needs. Over a quarter of immigrant families in the United States fall below the poverty line and qualify for Head Start services.¹⁶ However, enrollment and engagement in Head Start services among immigrant families remains proportionately below that of US-born families. Specifically, only 5% of immigrant children under age 3 are enrolled in any center-based childcare, such as Early Head Start, versus 35% of US-born children under age 3. Immigrant children and the children of immigrants with both parents working full-time are half as likely to be enrolled in center-based care, such as Head Start, compared to their US-born counterparts--11% enrollment versus 23% enrollment, respectively.¹⁵

Examining how and why immigrant families are engaged in Head Start services remains challenging because Head Start does not routinely gather immigration data such as immigration status on families when they enroll in the program. Head Start services are available to undocumented families, families in the U.S. with a visa or green card, and naturalized citizens. Given the extremely sensitive nature of immigration status data, such information is often omitted from research data collection. However, in the absence of enrollment data on immigration status, explorations into immigrants in Head Start are limited. Furthermore, explorations on the role of satisfaction in services as it relates to involvement in services are extremely limited. Only one previous study examined satisfaction in Head Start services as it relates to involvement in these services among Spanish- and Polish-speaking families. This examination found parent gender and satisfaction in services to be the most salient predictors of involvement in Head Start services.¹⁸ The underexplored area of satisfaction in Head Start services among immigrant and US-born families warrants further research.

This study first seeks to determine the role of parent demographic characteristics in involvement with Head Start services. Specifically, are parent demographic characteristics -- such as birthplace, educational attainment, and language -- associated with level of involvement in Head Start services? Further, do these characteristics predict immigrant parents' involvement? Next, this study investigates the role of parents' satisfaction with their child's Head Start program as directly related to their level of involvement, and does this satisfaction predict involvement?

Methodology Procedures

This study used a community-based participatory process. Prior to any data collection, the lead researcher met with the Head Start staff and Parent Advisory Committee. Every Head Start has, to some extent, a Parent Advisory Committee that consists of parents and caregivers of children enrolled in the school. The committee advises the school on everything from curriculum development to the hiring and firing of staff. Therefore, all data collection procedures were developed and all data collection conducted in collaboration with Head Start staff and caregivers. Caregivers and staff who assisted in the development of the study did so at their own discretion and were not compensated for their time.

Data were collected through an ongoing community partnership with two Head Start programs. Both Head Starts are located within the same neighborhood and serve a predominantly immigrant community of mixed origin. One Head Start is considerably larger than the other: one serves approximately 300 children; the other serves approximately 60 children. Participants were recruited in two waves. The first wave of data collection took place in the spring of 2013 in the larger Head Start preschool. Participants were asked to complete a consent form and small survey packet while dropping their children off or picking their children up from preschool. For many participants, English was not their first language, although nearly all participants reported a comfortable level in reading, writing, and speaking English. To accommodate participants who wished to complete their survey in their native language, surveys were translated into four languages in addition to English (Spanish, Cape Verdean Creole, Haitian Creole, and Vietnamese). Translations were completed by a professional translation service and back-translated by bilingual program staff to ensure accuracy.

The second wave of data collection came from the smaller Head Start preschool located in the same neighborhood. This round of data collection took place in the fall of 2014. Similar to the first round of data collection, participants were offered the opportunity to complete a survey when they picked up or dropped off their children at Head Start. Participants at both schools were offered a \$10 gift card for their time.

Surveys were primarily completed in English, although some other languages were requested. All participants indicated they were comfortable with written surveys and were invited to ask questions if they

did not understand any component of the surveys. All data collection procedures were approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board, and all participants consented to partake in this study.

Consistent with Head Start policies pushing for an increasing role of caregivers in their child's schooling, Head Start programs are now taking a more inclusive stance toward family involvement, rather than just parent involvement. Acknowledging that many "nontraditional" families have aunts, uncles, grandparents, and siblings raising children, parent involvement in education has been replaced by family involvement in education.¹⁹ Of particular importance in low-income and immigrant families, this provides a more inclusive idea of who plays a parental role in a child's life and captures data from nontraditional families. In the current study, data was collected on an individual level, allowing for multiple respondents per family. Selection criteria for parents/caregivers were left relatively open to allow for nontraditional family structures. Any adult that self-identified as a "regular care provider" for a Head Start student was welcomed to participate in the study, and families were welcome to have multiple caregivers complete surveys.

Measurement

Due to the unique model of Head Start schooling, a small number of measurement tools have been designed specifically for use in Head Start preschools. The Head Start model of education combines social services with traditional preschool education, creating a program that blends services for families, health screenings, and preschool education for children. This study collected quantitative data with two surveys that have been validated for use in the context of the Head Start program.

The Family Involvement Questionnaire (FIQ)²⁰ is a multidimensional measure of caregiver involvement in children's early education and was used in this study to capture family involvement. This 42-item questionnaire evaluates caregiver involvement in their child's education based on 3 facets of involvement: school-based, home-based, and collaboration between home and school. All questions are reported on a 4-point Likert-type scale and a sum score is used to calculate the results. The FIQ has been validated in US-born, English-speaking families as well as foreign-born, Spanish-speaking families. In both populations, the FIQ maintained a 3-factor structure and Cronbach's Alpha scores above .80.^{20,21}

The Parent Satisfaction with Educational Experiences Scale (PSEE)²² is a 12-item self-report measure of caregiver satisfaction with their child's early childhood education program and was used in this study to measure the caregiver's levels of satisfaction in their Head Start program. This measure asks caregivers to report their level of satisfaction on a Likert-type scale to assess their satisfaction in 3 areas of their child's education: their child's teacher, their child's classroom, and their child's overall school. All questions are reported on a 4-point Likert-type scale, and a sum score is used to calculate the results. Although developed and validated for Head Start, the PSEE has not been widely explored for validity among diverse immigrant families. In the earliest stage of this ongoing community-based participatory partnership with Head Start, the study team attempted to validate the PSEE for use with this dataset. Previous factor analysis and reliability analysis done with the same sample used in this study showed an overall Cronbach's Alpha = 0.916 among families born in the US and Cronbach's Alpha = 0.913 among families born outside of the US. However, it did not support the 3-factor model proposed in the PSEE measuring teacher, classroom, and overall school satisfaction.²³ Given the challenges in validating the 3-factor model of the PSEE, in this study, the PSEE was used to measure a unidimensional construct of satisfaction and did not attempt to utilize sub-measures of teacher, classroom, and overall school satisfaction.

Analytic Process

Statistical analysis was completed using Stata 12. In all analytic models, respondents with missing data were dropped, resulting in varying sample sizes but complete data sets without imputation. For the purposes of early exploration, analysis began by including an examination of the relationship between 3 sub-measures of satisfaction and 3 sub-measures of involvement. Embedded in the measurement tools on satisfaction and involvement were sub-measures of each construct. Satisfaction was broken into satisfaction in the classroom environment, satisfaction with the child's teacher, and satisfaction in the overall school (focusing on the school administration). Involvement was broken into 3 sub-measures focused on involvement in the school itself (such as volunteering in the classroom), involvement at home (such as homework help), and home-school conferencing (such as open communication with the teacher). Each sub-measure correlated so highly with the overall constructs that a more simplified analysis was warranted. Sub-measures of involvement each correlated with the overall construct of "involvement" at an $r=0.79$, $p<0.001$ level or higher. Similarly, each sub-measure of satisfaction correlated with

the overall construct of “satisfaction” at an $r=0.82$, $p<0.001$ level or above. Similarly, sub-measures of involvement showed high levels of correlation with one another. Given the overlap between each sub-measure and previous challenges in validating sub-measures of satisfaction in diverse communities, sub-measures were removed from all analyses and the constructs were collapsed into measures of overall satisfaction and overall involvement.

Measuring satisfaction and involvement as 2 separate variables creates a possibility that they may overlap or even serve as a proxy for one another. The relationship between the 2 constructs is complicated. Logically, there could be a reciprocal relationship between satisfaction and involvement in which the 2 variables are so intertwined that extrapolating one from the other would be nearly impossible. To examine the potential that satisfaction may, in fact, be a proxy for involvement, a Pearson’s correlation analysis showed a small to moderate correlation between satisfaction and involvement ($r=.44$, $p<.05$), indicating the 2 variables are separate but related constructs.

Results

Sample

The combined data from both schools yielded a sample of 196 people, from 17 different countries. One hundred forty-four people participated in the first round of data collection, and 52 people participated in the second round. The resulting sample was nearly 84% parents, 9% aunts and uncles, 5% grandparents, and 2% other. The sample was divided nearly evenly between US born participants and participants born outside the U.S., with 49% of the sample born outside of the US. Seventy-seven percent of the sample was female.

The sample of caregivers were predominantly black women; 76.5% of the sample self-identified as women and 66.0% self-identified as black. Of the caregivers that identified as being born outside of the US, the largest immigrant groups in the sample were from Haiti (17.8%), the Dominican Republic (6.1%), and Cape Verde (5.6%). Surveys were primarily completed in English; English was requested 84% of the time, Spanish 8%, Haitian Creole 4%, Vietnamese 2%, and Cape Verdean Creole 1%. While education levels among caregivers ranged from no formal education (1.0%) to a graduate degree (4.5%), the majority of caregivers had completed high school but had not completed college (28.1%). In terms of marital status, 36.2% of caregivers reported they

were unmarried and not in a committed relationship, and 25.5% reported they were married. The majority of caregivers (67.4%) reported having additional help with their child such as a family member or friend.

Statistical Analysis

With the collapsed satisfaction and involvement scores, multiple regression analysis sought to establish what, if any, variables predicted higher levels of involvement in a child's education. Bivariate regressions dropped any participants who had pertinent missing data. For example, any participant who did not answer questions related to involvement was not included in bivariate models related to involvement, thus resulting in slight variations in the sample size for each model. As seen in table 1, after an unadjusted bivariate regression analysis, results demonstrated the importance of satisfaction in services; as satisfaction in services increased, involvement in services increased by 6% ($\beta=6.69$, $p<0.001$). Additionally, a caregiver's level of education showed a significant relationship with involvement. Caregivers who had a high school degree were less involved than the reference group, caregivers who had at least a college degree ($\beta=-1.27$, $p<0.001$). Similarly, caregivers who had not completed high school were less involved than caregivers who had at least a college degree ($\beta=-1.91$, $p<0.001$). A caregiver's relationship to the child also showed a significant relationship with involvement with caregivers, such that caregivers who were not parents showed an over 2 unit decrease in levels of involvement when compared to the reference group, parents ($\beta=-2.65$, $p<0.001$).

Table 1. Unadjusted Bivariate Analysis of Demographics, Satisfaction, and Involvement

	n	Involvement Unadjusted Coefficient (95% CI)	N	Satisfaction Unadjusted Coefficient (95% CI)
Satisfaction		6.69** (3.31-6.09)		-
Language	187		194	
English		-		-
Other		0.72 (-5.43-11.64)		0.48 (-0.59-0.97)
Birthplace	184		190	
United States		-		-
Other		0.78 (-3.74-8.65)		-0.77 (-0.80-0.35)
Race	174		180	
Black		-		-
White		0.63 (-6.04-11.73)		-0.35 (-0.96-0.67)
Other		0.57 (-5.60-10.16)		1.01 (3.27-3.99)
Education	180		187	
College or above		-		-
High school graduate		-1.27 (-12.39-2.67)		-1.43 (-1.21-0.19)
Some high school or less		-1.91** (-14.89-0.25)		-1.15 (-1.10-0.29)
Relation to child	183		190	
Parent		-		-
Other		-2.65** (-19.47- -2.86)		-0.36 (-0.93-0.65)

 $p < 0.001 = **$ $p < 0.05 = *$

After establishing which variables produced statistically significant associations with a caregiver's level of involvement in a child's early education, a multiple regression analysis was completed to assess which variables showed a stronger relationship with involvement. Given the assumed importance of language and a caregiver's birthplace, variables assessing language and birthplace were included in the multivariate analysis. Similar to the bivariate analysis, the multivariate model demonstrated the importance of satisfaction, caregiver's level of education, and caregiver's relationship to the child. In this analysis, the strongest predictor of involvement in education was the level of satisfaction in services provided by the school. As satisfaction in Head Start services increased, involvement in Head Start services increased by 4% ($\beta=4.79$, $p<0.001$). The caregiver's relationship to the child also indicated a significant association with the level of involvement in the child's education. Nonparental caregivers such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents showed a 2.51% decrease in levels of involvement than the baseline group, parents ($\beta=-2.51$, $p<0.001$). Caregiver's level of education also showed a significant association with levels of involvement in education; as education increased, levels of involvement increased. Caregivers with a high school degree were less involved in their child's education than the baseline group, caregivers with at least a college degree ($\beta=-2.43$, $p<0.001$). Caregivers who had not graduated from high school were also less involved in their child's education than caregivers with a college degree ($\beta=-2.50$, $p<0.001$). As seen in Table 2, mean scores show that caregivers with lower levels of educational attainment and nonparent caregivers had lower levels of involvement in their child's Head Start program. Mean scores represent 2 very different scales: involvement in Head Start is measured on a scale from 35-140, while satisfaction in Head Start services is measured on a scale from 0-6. Standardized coefficients are used to allow for a comparison of different scales.

Table 2. Multivariate Analysis of Demographics, Satisfaction, and Involvement

	Mean Involvement	Standardized Adjusted Coefficient (95% CI)	Mean Satisfaction	Standardized Adjusted Coefficient (95% CI)
N	173		179	
Satisfaction	-	4.79** (2.21-5.32)	-	-
Language				
English	92.1	-	3.6	-
Other	95.2	0.03 (-10.1- 13.4)	3.8	0.49 (-0.9-1.4)
Birthplace				
United States	91.2	-	3.8	-
Other	93.7	0.29 (-6.7-8.9)	3.6	0.44 (-0.9-0.6)
Education				
College or above	95.6	-	3.9	-
High school graduate	90.7	-2.43** (-17.8- -1.8)	3.4	-1.85* (-1.5-0.05)
Some high school or less	88.3	-2.50** (-19.1- -2.2)	3.5	-1.36 (-1.4-0.3)
Relation to child				
Parent	94.8	-	3.8	-
Other	83.6	-2.51** (-20.6- -2.5)	3.6	0.49 (-1.1-0.7)

Satisfaction range: 0-6

Involvement range: 35-140

 $p < 0.001 = **$ $p < 0.05 = *$ **Discussion**

Any examination of immigrant family involvement in Head Start must make an effort to avoid the mistakes of overgeneralization. Equating racial,

ethnic, country, or language markers with immutable traits in children and families promotes an overly simplistic view of various populations.²⁴ This is not to say that commonalities within cultural groups are to be ignored or overlooked; rather, this is to allow for flexibility in the understanding of the literature around working with diverse communities. Furthermore, when examining minority and oppressed communities, research must allow for a historical context to promote a contextual understanding of how marginalized groups interact with government institutions such as Head Start.

The need to fully understand caregiver involvement in education stems from the important role involvement may play in a child's educational success. Caregiver involvement in education has been linked to positive academic and behavioral outcomes in children, and these positive gains appear to be even more pronounced in immigrant youth.¹⁻⁴ However, little is understood about how and why immigrant families are involved in their child's education. Some studies have suggested that immigrant families are less involved in their child's education than non-immigrant families for a variety of reasons, often citing cultural differences between immigrant families and the mainstream culture of the school, or language gaps between immigrant families and school personnel.^{10,25} Alternatively, other studies have suggested that immigrant family involvement in their child's education takes on forms of involvement not typically captured in current measurement tools. For example, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco¹⁴ suggested that many immigrant families place a stronger emphasis on the value of education than their US-born peers through talking about the importance of education with their children, rather than directly aiding in educational activities such as helping with homework. This form of home-based involvement in education is often left out of measures of involvement in education but may produce some of the positive effects associated with immigrant family involvement in education.

This study sought to understand if a caregiver's birthplace or language predicted their level of involvement in their child's Head Start services, or if any different variables showed associations with their level of involvement. Through initial bivariate analysis, this study found satisfaction, a caregiver's level of education, and a caregiver's relation to the child to have statistically significant relations with involvement in education. Conversely to previous research,^{10,25} the current study suggests that birthplace and language were not related to a caregiver's

level of involvement in their child's education. Multivariate analyses were employed to examine which variables produced the strongest relationship with a caregiver's level of involvement in their child's education. A caregiver's level of satisfaction in services showed the strongest association with a caregiver's level of involvement. Other related variables, including a caregiver's level of education and a caregiver's relation to their child, maintained significant, albeit weaker associations in the multivariate model.

Interestingly, contrary to previous research, 10,25 results did not indicate a statistically significant relationship between any variable related to immigration and levels of involvement in a child's education. English language proficiency and US nativity showed no statistically significant relation to the level of involvement in education. Results suggest that levels of involvement in early education by immigrant families may not differ from US-born families. Results from this study do not support findings of differences between immigrant and US-born families in variables that predict levels of involvement in early education.

The importance of satisfaction in services also provides an opportunity to engage in a 2-way dialogue with families to improve education services in an effort to increase involvement in a child's education. Evaluating family satisfaction in an early education setting gives providers a clear picture of where improvements can be made and may even provide a road map for improving education policy. Previous research on immigrant families in Head Start has largely focused on highlighting the unique needs of each immigrant group.^{10,14,25} Although this research has provided valuable information, the majority of Head Start preschools serve multiple immigrant communities alongside US-born communities--often in one classroom. This study sought to assess tools that could be used in an applied setting to work with diverse Head Start communities.

The other variables that showed significant relationships with involvement in Head Start services were caregivers' educational attainment and relation to the child. Educational attainment represents a complicated variable that may have a mediating relationship with employment. Indeed, previous research on a nationally representative data set found that for mothers, the relationship between education and involvement is fully mediated by employment. Interestingly, the same relationship is not fully mediated by employment for fathers.²⁶ Regardless

of mediating variables, the relationship between educational attainment and involvement, and caregiver relation to the child and involvement may have clinical significance. Clinical programming aimed at these populations may consider targeted and tailored engagement techniques.

The applied nature of this work provides implications for policy and practice with immigrant communities. Satisfaction in services may be a construct universally related to involvement in services at Head Start. The universal nature of this relationship provides a simple, clear tool for Head Start programs in their efforts to work with increasingly diverse immigrant communities. Simply collecting data on levels of satisfaction in services among parents and caregivers provides valuable information to Head Start policymakers. Furthermore, efforts should be made to explore intervention programming based on improving levels of satisfaction in services among parents and caregivers.

Limitations and Future Directions

The limited sample size of this study, combined with the diversity of the immigrant groups in the study, did not allow for an in-depth analysis of each immigrant group. Undeniably, each immigrant group, even each individual immigrant, enters the US education system with a unique understanding of a family's role in their child's education. Gaining a better understanding of how to improve levels of involvement in individual immigrant groups would warrant an in-depth examination of one group at a time. Previous research has suggested that immigrant groups enter the US education system with a framework based on their own previous experiences with education systems in their home country. If this framework for understanding is incongruent with the US education system, research has suggested that such a conflict can influence levels of involvement in education.^{20,25}

Further analysis is also needed when examining abstract constructs such as satisfaction in services. Satisfaction is a challenging construct to define and measure. Correlation analysis suggests satisfaction is a separate but highly related construct to involvement. Qualitative research is necessary to fully understand how satisfaction in services influences or is influenced by involvement in services. There is a possibility that involvement in services predicts satisfaction in services or, perhaps, that the relationship is reciprocal and more intertwined than a one-way predictor. The limitations of statistical analysis and of the small dataset used in this study cannot shed light on the potential intricacies of

this relationship. Qualitative analysis should be employed to further explore how these 2 variables relate.

Furthermore, of relevance to practitioners, further analysis should include an examination of what school-specific factors influence family involvement. To provide clearer direction for practitioners and potentially policymakers, an analysis examining concrete practices that schools can implement to improve satisfaction and involvement could provide useful insight to increase family involvement.

Implications

This research represented the beginning of a line of investigation into tools that can be used to increase engagement in Head Start services among diverse immigrant families. Immigrants in the US encompass a varied, multilingual, multicultural group. Efforts to provide Head Start teachers and staff with tools to work with increasingly disparate immigrant communities must reflect the reality in many classrooms. This exploration suggests that responsively evaluating satisfaction in services may be an effective tool for increasing engagement in Head Start services among immigrant communities. Although results are preliminary, this study suggests that incorporating an evaluation of satisfaction into regular audits of Head Start services could provide useful feedback for Head Start staff. Currently, the Administration for Children and Families conducts a semiregular audit of Head Start services that incorporates some elements of an evaluation of satisfaction in services. The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) includes some questions related to satisfaction in services, and FACES data has shown a connection between satisfaction and engagement in services.²⁶ Although the research on the connection between satisfaction and engagement offers promise as a useful tool for policy and practice, further exploration will provide more insight into how to incorporate measurements of satisfaction into various aspect of Head Start services creating a responsive education environment.

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