

## Experiences of Latinx Immigrant Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities in the IEP Process

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*Abstract*: Given the growing proportion of students receiving special education services who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), there is a critical need to understand the experiences of Latinx immigrant parents of children with disabilities. This qualitative study sought to understand the perspectives of nine Latinx immigrant parents of children with developmental disabilities regarding their child's individualized education program (IEP). We conducted semi-structured interviews and analyzed the data using a general inductive approach and constant comparison analysis. Seven themes emerged: (a) parents' insecurity of knowledge, (b) difficult terminology, (c) confusion with the IEP process, (d) discrimination or misconceptions, (e) language barriers, (f) need of parent advocacy, and (g) staff lack of knowledge. We discuss implications for future research and practice.

The culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) population in the United States (US) has gradually increased over the last several decades. At the current rate, it is estimated that about 40% of school-age children will speak a language at home other than English by 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In the 2019–2020 school year, 20.6% of the students in Texas received bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) service (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The prevalence of CLD school-age children receiving special education services is also increasing, which emphasizes the need for equity discourse in special education (Barrio, 2021). Research shows that students of color are disproportionately assigned to special education services (Scott et al., 2017). Research indicates that students of color experience disproportionately lower academic performance and higher dropout rates than those of their White counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Although advocates and policymakers have tried to alleviate this issue, racial disparities are still among the main

indicators of inequality in educational services (Fish, 2019; Kramarczuk et al., 2017).

Many studies have found that parental involvement is associated with student achievement (Sebastian et al., 2017). However, for parents with limited English proficiency (LEP), being involved with their child's education remains a challenge. Many CLD families arrive in the United States with different cultures, languages, and traditions. As such, they may be hesitant to advocate in the same way as other families do because they lack the knowledge of the education system from the United States (Harry, 2008). Thus, this presents challenges in access and opportunities for their children to receive special education services (Proctor, 2016).

Parents of children with disabilities are required to attend individualized education program (IEP) meetings annually in order to plan their children's education and coordinate special education services. Although parent involvement in special education and at the IEP meetings is extremely important, there can be a cultural disconnect that prohibits a strong partnership between families and educators (Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Improving the education of their children with disabilities requires parents to be actively engaged and advocate for

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their children's needs. However, for LEP parents, it is often difficult to voice their questions or concerns during the IEP process because of language barriers, lack of knowledge, and lack of cultural alignment (Harry, 2008).

Research about the perceptions and experiences of CLD parents at IEP meetings began in the 1980s. One of the earliest known studies of parent perceptions of IEP meetings explored the perspectives of 400 low-income parents of students in special education from a large, CLD metropolitan school district in southern California. Interviews were conducted at the families' homes in their preferred languages. Findings indicated that only 47% of the participants reported making suggestions at their child's IEP meetings, and parents seemed to adopt a passive role in the IEP process (Lynch & Stein, 1982). In a follow-up study, they interviewed Hispanic, African American, and European American parents about perceptions of their participation at the IEP meetings and compared the results. Hispanic and African American parents felt that they were given suggestions from school staff, but the communication was unclear. Hispanic parents reported a lack of knowledge regarding their responsibilities and rights (Lynch & Stein, 1987).

Park and Turnbull (2001) conducted a study with 10 Korean parents of children with disabilities and their perceptions about their relationship with professionals whom they work to meet the needs of their children. In-depth interviews were used in the parent's native language. Language barriers presented the greatest challenge for eight of the parents. Parents said their LEP limited their ability to have a meaningful interaction with professionals, preventing them from advocating and participating in school meetings and events. More recently, Larios and Zetlin (2018) conducted a case study with eight Latinx families with children in special education about their experiences in IEP meetings. Parents reported they wanted the best for their children, but their participation at the IEP meetings was impacted by their LEP, level of knowledge, and technical language used by the schools (Larios & Zetlin, 2018).

Apart from these limited examples, insufficient research has been conducted on parental involvement in special education focusing specifically on LEP parents from CLD backgrounds

(Fish, 2019). A recent systematic literature review explored studies from 1975 to 2020 that implemented interventions to increase CLD parent involvement in the IEP process (Dunn, manuscript submitted for publication). Among the 10 studies included in the review, only one study had clearly identified CLD parent participants. The lack of research for this population is likely an indicator of a lack of culturally aligned supports and services for these families. More research is needed to better understand the needs of CLD families about their views on the IEP process in order to inform best practices for school personnel. This information will help us to provide more culturally aligned support to increase parental involvement in the IEP process.

Culturally responsive practices recommend that to conduct and disseminate research in the native language to allow for their authentic voices to be represented in the mainstream literature (Barrio et al., 2017). Thus, the current research base presents gaps in the literature and the lack of culturally responsive approaches to parent engagement with children with developmental disabilities in preparation for and at the IEP meetings (Barrio et al., 2017). To address this gap in the literature, more qualitative research is needed to better understand how to best support LEP parents with children with developmental disabilities to be successful partners with the IEP team members. The present study explored the perspectives and experiences of Latinx parents of children with developmental disabilities as a means to develop culturally responsive IEP meetings. Our main research question was: How do LEP parents with children with developmental disabilities describe their perceptions and experiences in the IEP process?

## Method

We used the general inductive approach to analyze our qualitative data. The purpose of this inductive approach consists in identifying dominant or significant themes in raw data rather than derived from preexisting theory (Clarke et al., 2015; Thomas, 2006). The outcome of an inductive analysis is to develop key patterns from the data in order to reach conclusions. We chose this approach because it aims to condense raw text

**TABLE 1**

**Characteristics of Parent Participants and their Children with Developmental Disabilities**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Country of Birth</i>	<i>Years in the US</i>	<i>Level of Education</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Public Assistance</i>	<i>Child's Disability</i>	<i>Child's Age</i>
Juana	33	México	7	Associate Degree	Married	Yes	ASD	5
Rosio	42	México	23	Associate Degree	Divorced	No	ASD	5
Luz	44	México	13	Bachelor's Degree	Married	No	ASD	6
Laura	48	México	4	Master's Degree	Married	No	Down Syndrome	11
Martha	33	Perú	21	Associate Degree	Single	Yes	ASD	5
Maria	38	México	7	Bachelor's degree	Married	No	ASD	6
Sol	31	Venezuela	1	High School	Married	No	Cerebral Palsy	10
Tamara	40	México	5	High School	Married	Yes	ASD	7
Mary	42	México	10	High School	Married	Yes	ASD	8

*Note.* ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder.

into important themes and build up a connection between them (Thomas, 2006).

*Participants and Recruitment*

After receiving approval from the authors' Institutional Review Board, we began the recruitment process. First, we used snowball sampling to engage parents from a larger project with Spanish-speaking families with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to increase communication and literacy skills through reading. During the one-on-one parent training, these parents were invited to participate in this qualitative study and asked other parents to participate (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). We also posted messages on a Facebook group specifically for parents with children with developmental disabilities to recruit participants using purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Four of the participants came from the larger project, and five came from social media recruitment.

To be eligible, participants needed to have immigrated from Latin America to the U.S. and currently live in Texas, have LEP, have at least one child between 3 and 21 years old enrolled in a public school receiving special education services for developmental disabilities (e.g., ASD, intellectual disability), and have an IEP. Prior to the interviews, prospective participants answered demographic questions to determine their eligibility. A total of nine mothers participated in this study (see Table 1). We recruited participants until saturation was

reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Participants received a \$20 Amazon gift card.

We conducted a pilot interview to identify relevant questions that were important to the participant and to ensure the questions were clear and concise. We only used this data to clarify the protocol (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002) and did not include it in the analysis.

*Positionality Statement*

The first author served as the principal researcher and data collector. She is a visiting professor of special education and a native Spanish speaker with prior experiences working with CLD families in special education. When she arrived in the U.S., she did not know much about American special education laws. After working with CLD families in special education, she noticed many LEP families with children with developmental disabilities did not know about special education laws either. She sought to address this knowledge gap and opportunity gap to improve culturally responsive practices for schools and strengthen the communication between CLD families and educators. The second author, an associate professor of special education with experience in conducting qualitative studies with students with developmental disabilities, served as an auditor through the entire process. She identifies as a White woman and previously taught secondary special education with the majority of CLD

students in a large urban setting in the south-eastern United States. The third author has a doctorate in special education with prior experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities and CLD families. She is a native Spanish speaker who helped with coding the data.

#### *Data Collection*

This qualitative study was conducted through video conference via Zoom. Semi-structured questions permitted us to explore certain areas in greater depth and adjust the questions if needed (Patton, 2002). The interview protocol contained introductions and a list of questions to guide the conversation. It can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes each ( $M = 67.5$  minutes). All interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded by the primary researcher, and transcribed verbatim using *Happy Scribe*, an online transcription service.

A private home office was used to conduct the interviews on the Zoom electronic platform. The primary researcher attempted to build rapport and made sure the participants felt comfortable speaking openly about their experiences. We took field notes during the interview process to record observations of the participant's expressions and the tone of the participant's voice. The observation notes complemented the trustworthiness and credibility of the data.

#### *Trustworthiness and Credibility*

To establish trustworthiness, the first author and third author coded the same interview transcript independently (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This team-based approach reduced bias during the data analysis based on the consensus coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Additionally, the study had an auditor to corroborate the confirmability and objectivity of the data to establish credibility during each stage of analysis. The auditor gave her a theoretical perspective to determine consistency when analyzing the data to increase confidence in the research findings.

Lastly, we conducted two forms of member checking. We first invited participants to read their own interview transcripts in Spanish to check for accuracy, and then we contacted them again to review and critique our findings. Accountability was also reached by having an audit trail, including reflexive memoing and tracking data collection, analysis, and consensus decisions (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

#### *Data Analysis and Interpretation*

We created pseudonyms for each participant to keep confidentiality. We coded the interviews using the general inductive approach via constant comparison analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Each participant response was coded as unit data, ranging from one or two sentences to multiple paragraphs. First, we open-coded one of the transcripts to establish reliable procedures with the coding. Second, we independently open-coded the rest of the transcripts and met for consensus after each transcript. Third, we developed a set of preliminary code names within themes based on our primary research question and shared with participants for member checking to review for clarity, consistency, cohesion, and comprehensiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the first stage of member checking, only one participant responded to clarify one thing that she said during the interview, and changes were made. During the second stage of member checking, three participants responded and agreed with the themes found. They did not recommend any changes. Finally, the auditor provided feedback to confirm the final themes.

#### **Findings**

Participants described their experiences with the IEP process through the following seven themes: (a) parents' insecurity of knowledge, (b) difficult terminology, (c) confusion with the IEP process, (d) discrimination or misconceptions, (e) language barriers, (f) need of parent advocacy, and (g) staff lack of knowledge. We present a summary of these themes, organized by their frequency across participants (see Table 2). We chose to retain the Spanish quotes to elevate the voices of participants in their native language, followed by the English translation in italics.

**TABLE 2**

**Summary of Themes and Definitions**

<i>Category/Theme</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Parents' Insecurity of Knowledge	Parents' insecurity of knowledge refers to parents who do not know what special education services their child needs. Parents lack information about their child's disability and do not know what goals are best for their child.
Difficult Terminology	Difficult Terminology is the use of jargon and acronyms during the IEP meeting without personnel explaining the meaning in layman's terms for parents.
Confusion with the IEP Process	Confusion with the IEP process refers to misunderstanding interactions between the parents and the school personnel at the IEP meetings. Parents do not have prior information or knowledge for the IEP meeting and what to do after the meeting.
Discrimination or Misconceptions	Discriminations or misconceptions refer to parents' feelings of discrimination, inequality, stereotyping, and misunderstandings.
Language Barriers	Language Barriers are situations in which limited English proficiency is the reason for ineffective communication between the parents and the IEP professionals.
Need for Parent Advocacy	Parent Advocacy refers to the parents speaking, arguing, and defend for their children by themselves without feeling the support of the IEP professionals.
Staff lack of Knowledge	Staff lack of knowledge refers to the fact that parents feel that professionals are uninformed about their child's rights and goals.

*Parents' Insecurity of Knowledge*

All participants expressed a lack of knowledge about special education, even though they were very interested in being involved with their child's education. All but one of the participants only had one child with a disability. Therefore, when they got their child's evaluation, it was the first time they heard about special education services or a disability diagnosis. It was concerning because they did not know exactly what special education services meant and what services their child needed. Parents did not have enough information about their child's disability or special education law.

Mary said she felt hurt and scared because she did not know how to raise a child with a disability. "Sentí que era mi culpa, sentí mucho miedo. Sentí dolor porque yo no me esperaba nada de eso en primera dije no se Ingles, en segunda, no sabía cómo conseguir los servicios de educación especial". *I felt it was my fault, I was very scared. I felt pain because I didn't expect any of that and I said: one, I don't know English, two I really didn't know how to get the special education services.*

Tamara said the school gave her the option to receive the documents by mail and sign them or to go to the school for a meeting. She

said she decided to go to school to the IEP meeting to learn about the special education services for her child because she had no idea. "En la primera junta ni idea de que hablaban, ni sabia cuáles eran los derechos de mi hijo." *In the first meeting, I had no idea what they were talking about, and I didn't know my child's rights.*

Luz was in a similar situation, admitting she had no idea that IDEA (2004) existed. She said the IEP team did not tell her about the special education laws. She explained that she learned about it because she connected with other parents who also have a child with a disability. "Nunca me dijeron tú tienes derechos o nunca me mostraron qué hay leyes que protegen a mi hijo. Yo me imagino que es para que uno no pelee o para que uno no pida algo que la ley dice." *They never told me you have rights or showed me laws that protect my son. I imagine they don't even want us to know it, so we don't fight, or we don't ask for something that the law says.*

Martha stated that she did not know what services children with autism needed and what they needed to accomplish at the end of the school year. "No, me sentí segura de que esto es realmente lo que mi hijo necesitaba porque tampoco yo no tenía como una referencia de otro niño con autismo más o menos en el nivel

de mi hijo.” *I was not sure about what my child needed because I didn’t have a point of reference from another child with autism in a similar level than my son.*

Rosio also shared she did not know what autism was. She said she was completely lost, and everything happened too fast. When she was asked if her child’s goals were different this school year from last year, she said she did not remember because her son changed from one school to another. “Fíjese que no me acuerdo, pues en la otra escuela decían que ya habían acabado con las metas con él, entonces la verdad no sé muy bien, pero no creo que sean las mismas.” *I honestly don’t remember, at the other school they said that he completed the goals, I honestly don’t know very well, but I don’t think they are the same.*

Luz said, “Todavía recuerdo y lloró porque me dolió mucho, me dio mucho coraje e impotencia de no saber que hacer.” *I still remember, and I cry because it hurt me a lot, I felt impotence and anger of not knowing what to do.* Mary mentioned, “Me dio mucho miedo porque no sabía si lo iba poder sacar adelante.” *I was very scared because I didn’t know I could pull it off.*

Most parents ( $n = 6$ ) did not know how to explain their child’s disability. When asked, they would say one or two words related to communication, but it was a noticeably short answer. Moreover, they shared that the IEP professionals often did not explain special education law to them, and instead they referred parents to look at the copy of the IEP document.

All of the parents stated they learned about special education services and special education law through parent workshops, parent support groups, and other parents who were in a similar situation. About half of the parents ( $n = 5$ ) mentioned they learned how to talk at the IEP meetings because of the workshops. They said they usually take the IEP document to these workshops to get assistance with reading the document.

### *Difficult Terminology*

Participants talked about the complex vocabulary the school professionals used at the IEP meetings. All the participants felt they did not understand everything that was said at the

meeting, even if they had a translator/interpreter to help them. Luz said that at her first IEP meeting, she was feeling lost with the language, “Yo iba completamente ciega de qué era eso, de que significaban las terminologías que ellos utilizaban y las abreviaciones, yo estaba ahí como zombie.” *I was totally blind about that, about the terminology meaning that they were using and the abbreviations, I was there like a zombie.*

Martha felt similarly to Luz. When reflecting on her first experience, she expressed, “Fui sola y fue horrible la experiencia porque no le entendí a casi nada. Yo estaba casi llorando.” *I went by myself, and it was a horrible experience because I didn’t understand most of it. I was almost crying.* Juana stated, “No sé qué información ellos buscan cuando preguntan cosas, utilizan palabras muy grandes y van directo. Siento que a veces las preguntas son muy amplias y yo me quedo no tengo ni idea a que se refieren.” *I don’t know what they are looking for when they ask you questions, they use big words and go straight to it. I feel the questions are too broad and I have no idea what they are referring to.* Tamara echoed this sentiment, explaining that some of the words and concepts were very complicated.

Mary shared that the principal of the school was also her interpreter, but she still would take her husband because she was overwhelmed with so much information. She even said that she had doubts about signing the IEP document because she was unsure if she understood everything. She mentioned that even though the school personnel knew that Spanish was her first language, they still would give her the documents in English. She said in the past couple of meetings she asked for the documents in Spanish. Mary stated, “Yo decía ¿cómo es que yo voy a firmar algo que no estoy completamente segura de que entienda? Entonces yo empecé a decirles que me dieran los documentos en inglés y español.” *I was like, how I’m going to sign a document if I’m not completely sure I understood? Then, I started asking them for the documents in English and Spanish.* Sol had a similar situation; she had a teacher that would translate for her, but she would bring a friend to help her with the interpretation because she mentioned it is very difficult to understand even with the interpreter. She stated, “Yo la verdad no se mucho de las IEPs solo lo básico y la verdad no entiendo muy

bien, solo se lo que me va diciendo la persona que me ayuda." *I honestly don't know a lot about the IEPs, only the basics, I honestly don't understand very well, I only know what the person who helps me is telling me.*

In addition to feeling overwhelmed with the terminology used by IEP professionals at the meetings, many participants also felt that the terminology in the IEP document was difficult to understand even in Spanish. Tamara mentioned that she would take the Spanish IEP document home, but she thought that the translation was not accurate. "El papel que te dan con los objetivos de tu hijo ni siquiera están bien traducidos, no se quien se encarga de esas traducciones, no se le entiende." *The paper they gave you with the goals of your child is not even translated correctly. I don't know who translated those documents, [but] you can't understand them.*

Luz mentioned that she also asked for the IEP document in both languages but even the document in Spanish is difficult to understand. She stated, "Hay palabras y tablas que no entiendo y algunas otras cosas que digo y ¿esto? ¿qué significará?" *There are some words and tables that I don't understand and other things that I'm like, 'what is this? What does it mean?'*

#### *Confusion with the IEP Process*

Many participants ( $n = 6$ ) repeatedly discussed being confused with the IEP process in general. Participants did not know what to expect at the IEP meetings because they did not receive any prior training or attend a meeting with the teacher or any school personnel to tell them what to expect. Rosio stated, "No me explicaron de lo que se iba a tratar la junta solo me mandaron un correo invitándome a la junta." *They did not explain to me what the meeting was about, they just sent me an email inviting me to the meeting.* They felt they were not prepared to be at the meeting because they did not know anything. Rosio stated: "Para mí fue aterrador . . . porque uno no se espera que van a estar ahí como diez gentes, ¿y dije yo qué pasa? ¿Qué vamos a hacer? Me dio mucho miedo, ansiedad de no sé qué va a pasar con mi hijo." *I was terrified because . . . we don't expect 10 people there, I was like what is happening? What are we going to do? I*

*was very scared and anxious because I didn't know what was going to happen with my son.*

Martha shared that she often does not say anything because she does not know if what the professionals are saying is accurate, since she does not have much knowledge. Martha stated, "En la primera ocasión no dije nada porque la verdad yo sentía que solamente decía aja, si está bien. En la primera junta uno piensa que no tiene opción. Té dicen que es un documento legal entonces fírmalo." *At the beginning, I didn't say anything, I felt that I was just nodding saying yes, it is fine. At the first meeting, you think that you have no options. They tell you it is a legal document so sign it.* Luz expressed similar feelings, "Ósea me pusieron un traductor y todo, pero no entendía que era esa reunión para que era o que derechos yo tenía, que si mi opinión valía o no valía. Yo imaginé que ahí yo estaba nada más como escuchando y ya." *I mean, they had a translator and everything, but I didn't understand what the meeting was about, what rights I had, and if they considered my opinion or not. I just imagined I was there to listen.*

María exclaimed that they do not know what documents the IEP professionals are giving to them. "Nosotros estamos cegados, no sabemos en realidad que es lo que nos están dando" *We are blind, we don't know in reality what they are giving us.* Similarly, Luz said, "Yo me sentí totalmente confundida, sino hubiera sido por los talleres y por el grupo de apoyo de padres, tal vez a la fecha yo estaría Perdida." *If it wasn't for the parent support group or the workshops, maybe I would still be lost.* Luz revealed she attended parent support groups after her first IEP meeting because she did not understand the majority of the process and the IEP document. She searched online for parents in a similar situation and joined a group with workshops in Spanish to help parents understand the IEP document and understand special education law.

#### *Discrimination or Misconceptions*

Most participants ( $n = 6$ ) also expressed that the IEP professionals do not ask them their availability, they just inform them the day and time of the meeting without asking them. Mary said, "Al principio me mandaban por correo la carta para avisarme que tenía una junta en dos

días, me decían tiene la cita tal día y a tal hora, hasta que les dije que me dijeran con anticipación, no, yo me enoje con ellos” *At the beginning they used to tell me via email two days in advance the day and time of the meeting, until I told them to tell me in advance, no, I was mad at them.*

Few participants ( $n = 3$ ) thought that the professionals thought less of them and that was the reason for giving them less time in the meetings and for not telling them in advance. Tamara stated that she felt inferior compared to “white people.” “Ellas me mandaron un citatorio que decía que mi junta era de las 11:30 a 12:00 pm, porque te lo puedo jurar que ellas dijeron a esta Mexicana en 30 minutos la desocupamos, no habla Inglés, mírale el nopal en la frente.” *They sent me a document with my meeting time, and it said from 11:30 to 12:00 pm, because I swear they said they will dismiss this Mexican in 30 minutes. She doesn’t speak English, look at the cactus on her forehead.* Tamara thought that the professionals thought that of her, adding, “Si fuera anglosajona sería otra cosa.” *If I were Anglo-Saxon, it would have been different.*

Participants ( $n = 6$ ) felt unnoticed because the IEP professionals did not tell them what to expect at the meeting, and because they did not talk to the parents about IDEA and special education law, especially during their first meeting. Laura was convinced that the IEP professionals do not want them to know their rights, she stated “Entre menos sepas tu es mejor para ellos, así no hay pérdida de tiempo.” *The less you know, the better for them, that way there is no waste of time.* She felt hurt and said she wished she knew things related to her child’s disability before the first couple of IEP meetings. She stated, “Me duele, me duele haber sido ignorante por mucho tiempo.” *It hurts, it hurts that I was ignorant for a long time.*

All participants felt that they did not have the necessary tools to be able to support their children. They mentioned they received little or no information from the schools about the IEP meeting until they are at the meeting.

#### *Language Barriers*

Most participants ( $n = 6$ ) mentioned that they did not feel equipped to contribute to the IEP team because the majority of the professionals do not speak Spanish and they do not want

to talk to them in English because of the embarrassment of their accent. Some parents, like Mary, felt intimidated to talk to them: “Si le soy honesta, me intimidaba el no saber inglés.” *If I’m being honest with you, I used to be intimidated because I didn’t know English.* She mentioned that because she is learning more about her child’s disability and the IEP process, she feels less intimidated, and she asks more questions for the good of her child.

Rosio felt similarly and noted that at her first few meetings she felt intimidated. “Pues intimidada verdad, pues la mayoría son americanos verdad, eran muchas personas, pero este, era muy intimidante porque la directora de la escuela es Americana, pues todo lo están diciendo en inglés.” *Well, intimidated, right, because most of them are Americans, there were many people there, but, yes, it was very intimidating because the director of the school is American, and everything they are saying is in English.*

Since English is not their first language, some participants did not feel comfortable talking to the school personnel at the IEP meeting. Four parents mentioned they limit themselves to listening instead of being active participants despite their desire to be involved with their child’s education. Martha stated, “No me siento suficientemente cómoda para hablar tanto en ella.” *I don’t feel comfortable enough to talk during the meeting.* Sol also stated that language and immigration status was a big barrier for her to be involved at the IEP meeting. “La mayor parte creo es el idioma y el sentirme discriminada, tal vez como menospreciada por no hablar inglés o por no tener documentos.” *Most of it I think is the language and feeling discriminated against, perhaps as despised for not speaking English or for not having documents.*

Laura echoed this: “Yo en las primeras juntas no preguntaba porque tu piensas que los maestros son la ley, yo no decía nada porque yo decía es que yo soy inmigrante y no hablo Inglés, si me explicó.” *In the first meetings I didn’t ask anything, you think that the teachers are the law, I kept myself quiet because I was like, I am an immigrant, and I don’t speak English.*

#### *Need for Parent Advocacy*

Participants ( $n = 6$ ) felt the need to advocate for their children in order for them to receive



high-quality special education services. Maria mentioned she noticed something was not okay with her daughter, so she asked the school to do an evaluation. She said if she would not have asked, she probably would not be receiving special education services now. "Pues si yo no hubiera hecho nada y ella no hubiera sido diagnosticada ahorita a lo mejor seguirían con que no está bien, nada más tiene problemas. Como dicen en México es burrita, no puede hablar porque no quiere." *If I hadn't done anything and she hadn't been diagnosed right now, maybe they would continue with the fact that she has problems. As they say in Mexico, she is a slow learner she can't speak because she doesn't want to.*

Luz experienced a similar situation in which the teacher did not know she had a child with a disability in her class until Luz told her. Luz discussed how she started investigating how to help her child, "Empecé a conectarme con otros papás que también eran padres especiales y algunos de ellos me comentaron de grupos de apoyo y de algunas asociaciones quedaban tipo de talleres para que nosotros entendiéramos lo que era un [IEP] y las terminología y todo eso." *I began to connect with other parents who were also special parents and some of them told me about support groups and some associations offering workshops for us to understand what an [IEP] was and the terminology and all that.*

Laura also said the school did not pay attention to her until her child was a victim of bullying and was physically hurt by other kids at school. Laura stated, "Mi hijo estuvo cuatro años sin ningún tipo de servicio relacionado con la discapacidad de motricidad, nunca tuvo terapia de lenguaje, nunca tuvo terapia ocupacional, nunca tuvo nada, cuando se supone que en la reunión [IEP] están los objetivos del estudiante." She said, "No, un maestro no te va a decir nada." *My son went four years without any type of service related to the motor disability, he never had speech therapy or occupational therapy, he never had anything, when the [IEP] meeting is supposed to be the student's goals.* Laura felt that something terrible needed to happen for the school personnel to hear her voice. She revealed before she knew about her child's disability, she did not know anything about it. Since she did not see any progress with her child, she needed to study everything

related to special education. She shared that for a year she only slept three or four hours so she could study about special education law and the services her child needed.

#### *Staff Lack of Knowledge*

Most participants ( $n = 5$ ) reported that school personnel did not seem knowledgeable about the IEP document and special education law. Laura said that after going to the workshops for a few years she knows that the teachers lack information about the IEP document and special education law. She exclaimed, "Las maestras no están preparadas, no conocen los conceptos, si eres un papá que le gusta leer y que te gusta juntarte con grupos, te vas a dar cuenta que al final sabes más tú que el maestro sin importar el estatus migratorio." *The teachers are not prepared and don't know the concepts. If you are a parent who goes to parent groups, you realize that you know more than the teacher regardless of your immigration status.*

Additionally, parents felt school personnel lacked knowledge in the area of disabilities. Some general education teachers did not even know they had a child with a disability in their class. Luz shared that she stayed after school to talk to the teacher because she observed her child did not receive accommodations. Luz stated, "Me quede para hablar con la maestra y le digo mire mi hijo es Luis, yo no sé si usted sabe que él es autista, y me dice la maestra uh yo no tenía ni idea." *I stayed to talk to the teacher, and I told her, look, my son is Luis, I'm not sure if you know that he has autism. The teacher said, 'ugh, I had no idea.*

Maria had a similar situation to Luz, explaining that she thinks the teacher did not know about her child's disability. Maria mentioned her child does not look like she has a disability, but the only thing she observed is that her child could not speak. She thinks the teacher may just not have noticed it. She indicated, "La maestra no se había dado cuenta que mi hija tenía una discapacidad o no sé si no me dijo nada. La que yo moví todo fui yo." *The teacher did not know my daughter had a disability, or I don't know if she just didn't tell me anything. I was the one who pointed it out.*

Participants ( $n = 6$ ) also mentioned that after going to parent workshops to learn

about the IEP and special education law they noticed that some teachers only do copy-paste from other child's IEP or child's IEP from previous years. The parents felt worried about that. Juana stated, "En la última junta les dije no quiero que sea un copy-paste, porque si comparo la evaluación de dos años atrás a la de casi cuatro años, es exactamente igual palabra por palabra." *At the last meeting, I told them I did not want copy-paste, because if I compared the evaluation from two years ago to almost four years ago, is exactly the same thing, word by word.* Laura also shared, "Cuando yo saqué los sobres de la junta y los empecé a leer uno por uno por así decirlo con lupa, me di cuenta que era un copy-paste de los objetivos, un copy-paste de todo." *When I took the envelopes they give you and began to read them one by one, with a magnifying glass so to speak, I realized that it was a copy-paste of the objectives, a copy-paste of everything.*

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences and perspectives of Latinx immigrant parents of children with developmental disabilities in the IEP process. Overall, many participants seemed hurt and frustrated with the school system. Despite the calls to action from researchers, little has changed since the 1980s. Participants expressed a need for more tools to help their children and requested more support from the school personnel in the area of special education services and special education law. Our findings provide several important contributions to the field of special education about ways in which school professionals can improve their practices to include the voices of those underrepresented.

First, all of our participants desired a more active role during the IEP process and wanted better collaboration, but they also wanted to feel heard, understood, and supported. Participants expressed their desire to contribute and be involved in their child's education. Our themes underscored the complications with this collaboration, which expands findings from previous studies describing these parent-teacher collaborations. Prior literature indicates that a major barrier for LEP parents to participate in schools is the language barrier (Larios & Zetlin, 2018; Park & Turnbull,

2001). However, notably, in this study, having LEP was not the most commonly discussed barrier. Rather, it was the parents' lack of knowledge that often prevented them from participating in the IEP process to support their children with their education. Although the language was still a barrier, all participants reported that if they had the knowledge, their collaboration with school personnel would improve.

Second, our findings indicate that parents' perceptions regarding the IEP process did not differ substantially from one parent to another. All of the parents felt similarly to one another, regardless of their level of education and socioeconomic status. Parents identified many cultural factors that influenced their participation such as background, race, and language. This cultural disconnection echoes previous studies that emphasize the importance of cultural relatability (e.g., Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Well-educated parents seemed to be more active in finding resources for their children outside of school but had the same experience as the other parents at the IEP meetings. However, parents did not perceive themselves as meaningful participants in the IEP meeting, and they noted the lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of professionals. Parents seemed to face negative racial stereotypes, as they mentioned feeling less than the school professionals. Additionally, even though the time that parents lived in the US differed for all the participants, their experiences did not change much, even with more exposure to the U.S. school systems. Thus, when preparing the IEP document, the unique students' needs should be the main focus and not the parent's level of education or socioeconomic status (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014).

Finally, it is imperative to examine current teacher preparation for culturally responsive practices in general and special education settings (Barrio, 2021). The parent-teacher relationship is fundamental for a successful IEP meeting and student success (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). In our study, the voices of these participants reflect the tension and unequal relationships in special education. Thus, having communication with these families and listening to them is crucial to produce meaningful outcomes in education.

### *Implication for Practice*

We offer several practical recommendations for educators and school professionals when working with LEP parents with children with developmental disabilities. First, strengthen the communication between CLD families and educators. One of the main things to improve the interaction between families from Latin America and educators is empathy. Having empathy for parents that come from a different country is crucial. Educators and professionals should be open to other cultures, ask about the education system in their native country, and be able to open up the conversation so parents feel welcome. If teachers do not speak Spanish, we suggest they use an interpreter, or a letter translated into the parent's language to tell them how much they care about their family and their child's education. Be sensitive to nonverbal communication and understand the needs of those families.

Second, offer ways for LEP parents to navigate special education in their primary language. One of the ways to do it would be to create a vocabulary list in the parent's native language related to special education terminology and acronyms (e.g., goals, disability, accommodation, IDEA). This way, parents will feel more confident to participate in their child's education because they know what the terminology and acronyms mean. Likewise, ask parents for suggestions while creating the list and use positive and simple language. Third, improve culturally responsive practices related to the IEP process. When creating goals for the students from CLD backgrounds, a culturally responsive and relevant IEP needs to be developed. For example, the IEP team can seek input and information from the parents as equal partners in the process and include environmental, and linguistic/cultural backgrounds prior to making decisions for the students. Based on the findings from this study, all of the parents did not know they were part of the IEP team and did not feel part of it. By complementing the IEP with culturally relevant instruction, parents will feel part of it and will facilitate student success. Fourth, provide workshops to educate LEP parents to build their knowledge about special education. Schools should offer training sessions and workshops in Spanish for parents who are new

to IEP meetings or who have attended IEP meetings previously and want to learn more about the process. This can be done by inviting other parents who have more experience in the IEP process to serve as speakers. These connections can allow parents to see beyond the complicated IEP process and make them knowledgeable and prepared to become better advocates of their children with disabilities, leading to a higher quality of education and expanded post-school opportunities.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study has several limitations that recommend pathways for future research. First, this study involved a small number of participants that immigrated from Latin America. Future research should involve immigrant participants from different countries to examine perspectives from different regions. Second, the interviews were conducted in Spanish one-on-one and were analyzed in Spanish. This may lead to misunderstandings with the English translation. Future research should have an additional bilingual person to make sure the translation is accurate. Third, the study started by asking participants of a larger project to participate in this study. Although their participation was voluntary, it is possible that some parents felt obligated to participate because they were receiving services from the larger project team. Future research should aim to broaden the recruitment process to hear as many voices as possible and disseminate widely to educators. Next, training to schools should be implemented with fidelity to equip educators to develop effective communication with LEP parents.

### *Conclusion*

As the diversity of the students with developmental disabilities increases, it is critical to provide education, tools, and supports to LEP parents with children with developmental disabilities. The need to craft culturally responsive and relevant IEPs is crucial. As parents become more knowledgeable, they would feel more empowered to participate. These considerations will lead to more positive perceptions of the IEP process, a higher quality of education, and greater student success.

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Received: 28 September 2021  
Initial Acceptance: 2 December 2021  
Final Acceptance: 18 February 2022