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EDUCATION AND TREATMENT OF CHILDREN Vol. 23, No. 3, AUGUST 2000

A Comparative Analysis of Teachers', Caucasian Parents', and Hispanic Parents' Views of Problematic School Survival Behaviors

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Abstract

Scholars have asserted that the misclassification of culturally diverse students in programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) may be attributable, at least in part, to the mismatch between the behavioral expectations present in the students' home environments and those prevalent within schools. A preliminary study was conducted to explore whether Caucasian and Hispanic parents' views of negative classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors were consistent with one another and with those of general and special education teachers. Overall, the results suggest that parents (Caucasian and Hispanic) generally hold similar views regarding the extent to which it was problematic for a student to exhibit such behaviors. In contrast, teachers (special and general educators) and parents (Caucasian and Hispanic) differed significantly on many items related to negative classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors. The results and future research needs are discussed.

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The number of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the United States is increasing dramatically and is expected to continue (Carrasquillo, 1991). In contrast, the number of teachers from culturally diverse backgrounds is decreasing (Justiz & Kameen, 1988) and, by the turn of the century, the number of Caucasian teachers is expected to increase from 92% to 95% (Henry, 1990). Because the cultural context of most North American schools is middle class European American (Anderson, 1994; McIntyre, 1996; Mercer, 1979; Nelson, 1995; Peterson & Ishii-Jordan, 1994), the parallel increase in the number of culturally diverse students and Caucasian teachers imposes a contrast in cultural backgrounds. This contrast is even more apparent in special education where culturally diverse students are often disproportionately represented in various programs for students with disabilities, including

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Paper presented at the 23rd Annual TECBD Conference on Severe Behavior Disorders of Children and Youth, Scottsdale, AZ.
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Pages 314-324

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those for pupils with emotional or behavioral disorders (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Viadero, 1992; Garcia, 1988; U.S. Department of Education, 1995; Neisser, 1986; Kauffman, 1997). In this context, it is of interest to explore individuals' views of problematic school survival behaviors held by culturally diverse populations to develop an understanding of how culture may contribute to the misclassification of culturally diverse students in programs for those with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD).

Studying culturally related views of behavioral expectations is important because behaviors vary by culture (Light & Martin, 1985; Toth, 1990). Thus, culture influences the way in which students from culturally diverse backgrounds behave. It appears that the literature in this area centers on the role of the family and the impact that the home environment has on student behaviors. For example, family norms (e.g., Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990), parental-child interactions (e.g., Marion, 1980; Shea & Bauer, 1985), and child-rearing practices (Kramer, 1988; Hartley, 1974) have been discussed by scholars in an attempt to demonstrate how student behavior varies according to the family interaction and parental roles found within the home environment. This literature highlights the differences in behavioral norms between the school and home environments and encourages teachers to become more sensitive to the family interactions and norms before deciding if behaviors are problematic or simply a reflection of a student's cultural/family background.

Further explanations of culturally influenced behaviors center on the influence that family interaction has on communicative styles (e.g., Cartledge & Milburn, 1996; Rosando, 1994; Saracho & Gerstl, 1992). Scholars highlight the importance for teachers to be aware that although a student's style of communication may not be acceptable according to Caucasian norms of communication, his or her communicative behavior may be more accurately described as an expression of cultural style than as a problematic behavior (Rosando, 1994; Saracho & Gerstl, 1992).

In light of these arguments, many scholars have contended that the misclassification of culturally diverse students in programs for students with EBD may be attributable, at least in part, to the mismatch between the behavioral expectations present in students' home environments and those prevalent within the school environments (Almanza & Moseley, 1980; Grossman, 1990; McIntyre, 1992). Moreover, these scholars have suggested that teachers' views regarding the extent that classroom behaviors are problematic may differ from the views held by parents from culturally diverse populations. As a result, lack of understanding of the influence of culture, communications styles, and socioeconomic factors (among others) can lead to misinterpretation of student behavior and inappropriate attribution of student difficulties to a disability (Ochoa, Robles-Pina, Garcia, & Breunig, 1998). Thus, the misclassification of culturally diverse students in special education placement for students with

EBD may result when the behavioral expectations differ between culturally diverse students' homes and school environments.

Although scholars have suggested that cultural influences on behavior lead to the misclassification of culturally diverse students as EBD, there appears to be no research that has examined this contention. The purpose of this study was to explore whether Hispanic and Caucasian parents' views of problematic school survival behaviors are consistent with those of teachers. Specifically, we studied the views of parents of young children (2nd and 4th grades) and elementary school teachers regarding classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors (described below) in urban and suburban school districts. School survival behaviors are those that competent students apply to enhance the likelihood of academic success in education settings (Brown, Kerr, Zigmond, & Harris, 1984). We focused on school survival behaviors because students with EBD have been identified as being less likely to exhibit them (Kauffman, 1997).

Method

Respondents and Setting

Respondents for this study included 377 parents (234 Hispanic and 143 Caucasian) of 2nd and 4th graders and 117 teachers (95 general and 22 special education teachers) from an urban and a suburban elementary school district (K-6). The schools districts were located on the western edge of metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona and were similar in regards to the demographic characteristics (i.e., socioeconomic level and ethnicity) of the students they served. Each school district served low socioeconomic ethnically diverse communities as indicated by the high percentage (over 70% in both school districts) of students eligible for free or reduced lunches. Approximately 70% of the students attending these districts were Hispanic, 20% were Caucasian, and 10% were African American, Native American, or Asian American.

The 234 Hispanic parents represented a return rate of 63%. Of the total Hispanic respondents, 133 (57%) were from the urban elementary school district and 101 (43%) were from the suburban elementary school district. The 143 Caucasian parents represented a return rate of 75%. Of the total Caucasian respondents, 73 (51%) were from the urban elementary school district and 70 (49%) were from the suburban elementary school district. The 117 teacher respondents represented a return rate of 59%. Of the total participating teachers, 68 (58%) were from the urban school district and 49 (42%) were from the suburban school district.

Procedures

A series of short descriptive vignettes were developed to assess parents and teachers views of nine school survival behaviors 1. The vignettes were based on previous research conducted on school survival skills (Hersh & Walker, 1983) and included 6 classroom and 3 interpersonal behaviors. The classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors included:

Classroom

1) Breaking classroom rules.
2) Ignoring the teacher's instructions.
3) Ignoring the teacher's requests.
4) Failure to do assignments as directed.
5) Performing below ability level.
6) Making inappropriate requests.

Interpersonal

7) Submitting to peer pressure.
8) Expressing anger inappropriately.
9) Disrespecting others' rights/property.

Nine short, descriptive vignettes for each of the school survival behaviors were developed by the researchers. These vignettes reflected situations in which a student displayed each of the behaviors. For example, in the case of ignoring the teacher's requests 2, the vignette was "The teacher tells Elizabeth to spit her gum out into the trash can. Elizabeth ignores the teacher and doesn't spit out her gum." Respondents indicated the extent to which they believed the behavior depicted in the vignette to be problematic on a 5-point Likert-type scale (i.e., (1 = NO) indicating strong disagreement; (2 = no) indicating disagreement; (3 = ?) neutral/undecided; (4 = yes) indicating agreement; (5 = YES) indicating strong agreement). The scale was used to ensure continuity across respondent groups (e.g. Nicholls & Nelson, 1992; Nelson, Nicholls, & Gleaves, 1996; Nicholls & Nelson, 1995). Respondents indicated their response by circling it on the scale.

Parents of 2nd and 4th grade students (we only included the Hispanic and Caucasian respondents in our analyses because of the limited numbers of other ethnic groups) were given a copy of the vignettes (all of them were on one page) under a cover letter by their child's respective classroom teacher. Students were instructed to hand-carry it to their parents. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study, provided directions for completion, and detailed the informed consent and anonymity procedures. Spanish and English forms of the cover letter and vignettes were provided to parents depending upon their primary language. Additionally, all elementary school teachers were given the vignettes under a cover letter, which paralleled the one provided to parents.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the views of primary (1st

through 3rd), intermediate (4th through 6th), and special education teachers regarding each of the nine problematic school survival behaviors. The results of these analyses revealed no statistically significant differences in the views of primary, intermediate, and special education teachers (e.g., Vignette 1: $F(2, 174) = 1.78$, $p > .05$). Therefore, it is important to note that the category "teachers" reflects the mean responses of primary, intermediate, and special education teachers taken together. Additionally, information was not collected on the cultural backgrounds of teachers to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. Thus, these variables were not considered in any further analyses.

Results

To determine whether respondents were significantly resolute, rather than indecisive or neutral about the extent to which the behavior was problematic, the 95% confidence interval for each mean was computed for all analyses to determine whether it encompassed the midpoint of the scale. Those mean responses in which the 95% confidence interval did not encompass the midpoint of the scale (i.e., 3=undecided) are underlined in Table 1.). Responses to each vignette were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether there were statistically significant difference in the views of teachers and parents (Caucasian and Hispanic) regarding the classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors. Post hoc analyses (i.e., Scheffe') were conducted when appropriate. Table 1 presents the mean responses for teachers and parents and associated standard deviations and *F*-values.

Classroom

Inspection of Table 1 reveals that teachers and parents generally believed that it was problematic for a student to exhibit each of the classroom school survival behaviors. Teachers did not think it was problematic for students "not to do assignments as directed" and were uncertain whether it was problematic for a student to "break classroom rules." Similarly, parents (Caucasian and Hispanic) were undecided whether it was problematic for students to "not do assignments as directed." Caucasian parents were also uncertain whether it was problematic for a student to "perform below ability level."

Inspection of Table 1 also shows that there were no statistically significant differences in the views of Caucasian and Hispanic parents on 5 of the 6 classroom school survival behaviors. Hispanic parents were more likely than Caucasian ones to support the proposition that it was problematic for a student to "perform below ability level." Additionally, there were statistically significant differences in the views of teachers and parents on 3 of the 6 classroom school survival behaviors. Parents (Caucasian and Hispanic) were more likely to support the propositions that it

Table 1

Mean Responses for Teachers and Parents and Associated Standard Deviations and F-values.

		Parents		
	Teachers $_a$ (n=177)	Caucasian $_b$ (n=143)	Hispanic $_c$ (n=234)	
Vignette	Mean	Mean	Mean	F(2,551)
Classroom				
1. Breaking classroom rules.	2.57_{bc} (1.18)	$\underline{3.20}_a$ (1.19)	$\underline{3.39}_a$ (1.35)	16.54***
2. Ignoring the teacher's instructions.	$\underline{3.39}$ (1.21)	$\underline{3.66}$ (1.09)	$\underline{3.65}$ (1.23)	2.15
3. Ignoring the teacher's requests.	$\underline{4.62}$ (0.71)	$\underline{4.58}$ (0.95)	$\underline{4.42}$ (1.02)	2.27
4. Failure to do assignments as directed.	$\underline{2.11}_{bc}$ (1.11)	2.97_a (1.24)	2.99_a (1.34)	21.01***
5. Performing below ability level.	$\underline{3.32}$ (1.09)	3.05_c (1.24)	$\underline{3.51}_b$ (1.31)	5.60**
6. Making inappropriate requests.	$\underline{4.09}_c$ (1.05)	$\underline{4.04}$ (1.07)	$\underline{3.66}_a$ (1.35)	6.50**
Interpersonal				
7. Submitting to peer pressure.	$\underline{4.75}_c$ (0.51)	$\underline{4.59}$ (0.98)	$\underline{4.35}_a$ (1.18)	7.10**
8. Expressing anger inappropriately.	$\underline{4.87}_{bc}$ (0.48)	$\underline{4.59}_a$ (0.91)	$\underline{4.37}_a$ (1.21)	9.88***
9. Disrespecting others' rights/property.	$\underline{4.81}_{bc}$ (0.54)	$\underline{4.51}_a$ (0.93)	$\underline{4.31}_a$ (1.27)	9.30***

Note. Underlined means indicate that the 95% confidence interval did not encompass the midpoint of the scale (3 = undecided). Numbers in parentheses are the associated standard deviations. Subscript letters indicate statistically significant differences among means. **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$.

was problematic for a student to "break classroom rules" and "not do assignments as directed" than were teachers. Further, teachers were more likely to support the notion that it was problematic for a student to make an "inappropriate request" than were Hispanic parents.

Interpersonal

Inspection of Table 1 reveals that teachers and parents (Caucasian and Hispanic), without exception, believed that it was problematic for a student to exhibit the interpersonal school survival behaviors. Additionally, there were no statistically significant differences in the views of Caucasian and Hispanic parents regarding these interpersonal behaviors. Teachers, however, were more likely to support the propositions that it was problematic for students to "express anger inappropriately" and "disrespect others' rights or property" than were parents (Caucasian and Hispanic). Teachers were also more likely to believe that it was problematic for a student to submit to "peer pressure" than Hispanic parents.

Discussion

Some scholars contend that the misclassification of culturally diverse students in programs for students with EBD may be attributable, at least in part, to the mismatch between the behavioral expectations present in the students' home environments and those prevalent within the school environments (Almanza & Moseley, 1980; Grossman, 1990; McIntyre, 1992). These scholars suggest that teachers' views regarding the extent to which classroom behaviors are problematic may differ from the views held by parents from culturally diverse populations. The purpose of this study was to explore whether Hispanic and Caucasian parents' views of negative classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors are consistent with those of teachers.

There are several findings we would like to highlight. First, although scholars contend that behavioral expectations often vary by culture (Light & Martin, 1985; Toth, 1990) and that individual attitudes and values are intimately related to one's cultural system (Ember & Ember, 1985), the results of this study suggest that these assertions need to be studied more closely. Because Caucasian and Hispanic parents generally had similar views regarding the classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors, it appears, if our results hold up to further scrutiny, that culture has a relatively small, if any, impact in determining the way in which parents view behavior. There is little doubt that there would have been a higher degree of continuity in respondents' views if more serious problem behaviors (e.g., verbal aggression) had been studied.

Second, although the results of this study indicate that Hispanic and Caucasian parents' views of classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors tend to be relatively similar, it is of interest to discuss the two

behaviors on which these groups differed. Hispanic parents were more likely to believe that it is problematic for a student to "perform below ability level" and "inappropriately make a request" than Caucasian parents. These findings are consistent with literature which indicates that Hispanic parents tend to expect their children to study hard, cooperate with the teacher, and follow rules to better themselves so that they have opportunities that they may not have had in their homelands (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996; Marion, 1980; Kramer, 1988).

Third, teachers and parents significantly differed on 4 of the 6 classroom school survival behaviors and on all interpersonal behaviors. These findings are consistent with previous research that indicates that parent and teacher agreement on the assessment of student behavior tends to yield low to moderate correlations (Handen, Feldman, & Honigman, 1987; Merrell, Popinga, 1994; Wright & Piersel, 1992). These findings are also consistent with previous research which suggests that parents, especially those who are culturally diverse, tend to have a lack of knowledge regarding the behavioral standards expected in the schools (Middleton, 1994).

Finally, teachers tended to consistently believe that it was problematic for students to exhibit negative classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors. This finding supports previous results of researchers that teachers tend to have a low tolerance for problematic behaviors and generally have behavioral standards and expectations which are narrow, intense, and very demanding (Walker & Rankin, 1983; Algozzine, et al., 1983). This finding also supports previous research which indicates that general and special education teachers' levels of tolerance of inappropriate classroom behaviors are similar to one another (Safran et al., 1985; Ritter, 1989; Landon & Mesinger, 1989). Additionally, general and special teachers' mean responses did not vary regarding the classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors. This finding is inconsistent with previous research which suggests that general teachers are less tolerant of maladaptive types of problematic behavior than are special teachers (Safran & Safran, 1987; Algozzine, 1980; Schloss, et al., 1983).

It is important to note that the findings of the present study were limited in several respects. First, because no information on the cultural background of teachers was collected, it is not clear to what extent the ethnicity of teachers would have influenced the results. For example, the relative consistency in the responses of Hispanic and Caucasian parents may have been a function of parents anticipating the expectations of teachers rather than their own beliefs. Related to this issue, it is not clear whether the results truly reflect the views of any of the respondents. Teachers and parents may have responded based on what they predicted to be socially acceptable. Second, because parents responded to the vignettes at home, it may have been possible for them to discuss their responses with other parents and respond according to how teachers might view negative classroom and interpersonal school survival behav-

iors. The possibility of communicating during the course of a study among respondents to learn the nature of the study/vignettes involved is a threat to internal validity (Maxwell & Delaney, 1990). Thus, instead of responding to items based on their own perspective, parents may have responded similar to teachers or differently from how they normally would have responded. Finally, because of time constraints, many of the vignettes did not provide rich and varied descriptions of the classroom and interpersonal school survival behaviors. Thus, one must consider the findings within the context of the present study. The results may have varied if different, more descriptive vignettes were used.

Finally, despite the preliminary nature of the findings, the present study highlights the need for educators and other professionals to more systematically study the interrelationship between culture and behavior. Although there is a plethora of writings on the issue, there appears to be a dearth of research that investigates how culturally diverse populations view school-related behaviors. Therefore, continued research in this area is necessary to flush out factors to explain the views and behaviors of culturally diverse populations. Results revealed from this research encourage educators to consider variables unrelated to culture when determining the functions of behavior exhibited by culturally diverse students. Additionally, it appears few empirical studies have been conducted to examine the referral process with culturally diverse students (Ochoa, Robles-Pina, Garcia, & Breunig, 1998). The few studies that have been done in this area were limited in scope and generalizability. Because high referral rates have contributed to the misclassification of culturally diverse students in special education (Arguelewicz & Sanchez, 1983), future research which examines the process involved in referring culturally diverse students to special education is necessary to determine which variables potentially bias the referral and lead to misclassification.

Note

[1]An advisory group (n=23) made up of parents, teachers, and students guided the development of the specific procedures utilized in the current study. This group recommended the use of short descriptive vignettes rather than a lengthy questionnaire to ensure that respondents would understand the school survival behaviors being presented. The advisory group made this recommendation to increase the comprehensible input of the Hispanic respondents who exhibited a wide range of English language proficiency.

[2]Copies of all vignettes are available from the first author.

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