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### Facilitating Stepfamily Education for Latinos

Katie Reck<sup>a</sup>, Brian Higginbotham<sup>a</sup>, Linda Skogrand<sup>a</sup> & Patricia Davis<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Family, Consumer and Human Development, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, USA

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## Facilitating Stepfamily Education for Latinos

KATIE RECK, BRIAN HIGGINBOTHAM, LINDA SKOGRAND, and  
PATRICIA DAVIS

*Department of Family, Consumer and Human Development,  
Utah State University, Logan, Utah, USA*

*Relationship education programs can serve as a resource to families in developing and maintaining strong familial relationships, particularly for underserved populations. This qualitative study focuses on effective strategies, used by 14 facilitators, to teach Latino participants attending Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey stepfamily education courses in a western state. Results indicated two major themes regarding culturally appropriate strategies. The first dealt with classroom management and the approach of the facilitators, which included three subthemes: encouraging class discussion and sharing, applying cultural understanding, and recognizing the importance of the parent–child relationship. The second major theme addressed modifications to the program curriculum.*

**KEYWORDS** *ethnicity, Latino families, marriage, qualitative research, remarriage, step-families*

### INTRODUCTION

Interest in relationship education (RE) has increased over the past decade with the development of numerous programs and initiatives across the country (Larson, 2004). With this increase in educational availability, focus has expanded to not only include mainstream, European American, middle-class families but also populations who are under-researched and underserved, such as families from ethnically diverse cultures and nontraditional family types (e.g., stepfamilies) (Administration of Children and Families, 2005). Strategies developed for teaching stepfamily education have historically been

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Address correspondence to Katie Reck, Department of Family, Consumer and Human Development, Utah State University, 2705 Old Main, Logan, UT 84322-2705, USA. E-mail: katie.reck@usu.edu

based on European American, middle- to upper-class families, and few scholars have documented best practices for facilitating RE with ethnically diverse stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Robertson et al., 2006). To expand current research and best practices for RE programming, this study focuses on identifying and validating culturally appropriate strategies for facilitating Latino stepfamily education.

Stepfamilies have become an increasingly common family form in the United States (Ganong & Colman, 2004). Approximately 50% of all first marriages and 60% of all second marriages will end in divorce. Of those who divorce, 75% are estimated to remarry within 10 years (Raley & Bumpass, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). According to Census estimates, 29% of all current marriages are remarriages for at least one spouse. Of those who remarry, 50% of women and 47% of men will have had one or two children from a previous relationship. Twenty-four percent of women and 21% of men will have had more than three children from a previous relationship. This means that over one-third of all remarried households will include at least one stepchild (Krieder, 2006).

Consistent with national trends, the number of stepfamilies from diverse populations has also grown. Latinos are now the largest and fastest growing minority population in the United States. Current population estimates indicate that the Latino population consists of 12.5% of the total U.S. population and will increase to 24.4% by 2050. Most of these Latino families are Spanish-speaking from Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America countries (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Although Census data predict a significant increase in Latino families within the United States, it is somewhat difficult to identify exactly how many of these families will be stepfamilies. Among Latinos, it is estimated that approximately 52% of all marriages will end in divorce, with 44% remarrying within 5 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). This estimate, however, does not accurately reflect the diversity of Latino families today. For example, those born outside the United States are less likely to divorce than those born within the United States. Latinos born within the United States generally are less likely to marry and have higher divorce rates than European Americans.

Although remarriage is occurring less often among Latinos born within the United States, repartnering remains high, with most couples repartnering more often than they remarry. Approximately 38% of Latino women age 36 have had a premarital birth (McNamee & Raley, 2011). Finally, a large portion of undocumented immigrants are present within the United States, which inhibits our understanding of the prevalence of Latino stepfamilies in the United States. For example, in January 2000 over 7 million undocumented immigrants, who were not necessarily included in current population reports, were present in the United States (Department of Homeland Security, 2003).

## Latino Stepfamilies and RE Programming

Most extant stepfamily literature considers the experiences of European American families, leaving a gap in the current understanding of ethnically diverse stepfamilies (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Additionally, best practices in facilitating RE programs for low-income and ethnically diverse populations are lacking in the current field (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; Robertson et al., 2006). In an effort to bridge these gaps, a publication by Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, and Higginbotham (2009) gave a summary of the current research regarding Latino stepfamilies and suggested implications for programming. Specifically from the literature, the authors identified religion and familism as important cultural characteristics that may impact programming for Latino populations.

As reviewed by Skogrand et al. (2009), religion has an important role in the Latino community, affecting culture, tradition, and family values. Religious beliefs around the sanctity of marriage can influence perceptions of divorce and remarriage (*cf.* Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008). Skogrand and colleagues (2009) suggested facilitators should understand the importance of religious values and practices within the Latino culture to appreciate the perspective from which family practices and views on the family structure are likely based. Additionally, facilitators should be aware of country-of-origin and the degree of acculturation within the Latino population they are serving. For example, families who come from highly religious countries seem to demonstrate a greater stigmatization toward stepfamilies (Berger, 1998).

The literature also suggests that familism is an important cultural characteristic for Latino stepfamilies. Familism, according to Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, and Gallardo-Cooper (2002), is the emphasis on the intimate relationships that exist within Latino families. This definition may include the importance of extended family members and respect between family members (Skogrand et al., 2009). Familism may also affect the perspective and expectation of the family itself. For example, because of strong perceptions of the family, stepfamilies may be stigmatized. As such, some Latino families may be reluctant to identify themselves as stepfamilies or to discuss the origins of their family structure (*cf.* Coltrane et al., 2008).

Based on the current literature regarding familism, one suggestion provided by Skogrand et al. (2009) was to conduct preprogram orientations to address concerns or answer questions regarding program content or the use of the “step” term. Additionally, programs could consider using a diversity of terms in describing stepfamilies (e.g., new family, blended family, and combined family) rather than solely using the stepfamily term. This may help avoid any confusion or negative stigmas. The authors also suggest that extended family members and children could be involved RE programming (i.e., maintaining familial views and traditions).

A final suggestion discussed by the authors was to facilitate trust between program participants and staff. Due to an array of trust issues, including documentation concerns, facilitators should foster a safe environment where open discussion, participation, and appropriate information can be provided. Trusted staff members, or staff members affiliated with trusted organizations, should be used to develop and maintain relationships with program participants.

Although Skogrand and colleagues (2009) offered suggestions and implications for working with Latino stepfamilies, their article did not provide an assessment of these strategies in practice. The current study adds to previous suggestions by examining 14 Spanish-speaking facilitators, during postprogram qualitative interviews, on how to effectively teach Latino participants in a stepfamily education course.

### Theoretical Framework

Following suggestions by Adler-Baeder, Ericson, and Higginbotham (2007), this study used an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to more fully understand the differing levels (e.g., microlevel, macrolevel) that may affect Latino stepfamilies in RE programs. Additionally, Adler-Baeder (2007) suggests using the family strengths perspective when working with stepfamilies. The family strengths perspective (DeFrain, & Asay, 2007a) assumes that all individuals and families have strengths, and rather than focusing on the negative aspects of their relationships, a positive focus is emphasized. Additionally, DeFrain and Asay (2007b) describe a model in which cultural sensitivity can be gained through examining both the strength of the family and culture surrounding the family. In conducting the analysis of this study and in applying the findings to programs today, the ecological and strengths perspectives were used to more fully understand Latino stepfamilies and how they can best be served in RE programming.

### METHODS

This study focuses on culturally appropriate strategies used in facilitating stepfamily RE programming among Latino stepfamilies in a western state. As part of a federal grant, *Smart Steps: Embrace the Journey* (Adler-Baeder, 2007) courses were provided in partnership with established community organizations. Twenty-three different courses were offered during a 2-year period targeting both English- and Spanish-speaking stepfamilies. Nine of the 23 classes were taught in Spanish, serving 134 adults and their children. The adults that were served in these Spanish-speaking classes included 64 men and 70 women. Of these participants, 121 reported being of Latino decent and 4 of European American descent (9 did not report their ethnicity).

Their median household income was between \$15,000 and \$20,000, with a median education level of 11 years (less than a high school degree). The median age for participants was approximately 35 years.

Course content for the *Smart Steps* course consisted of six 2-hour sessions where parents and children (ages 6–17) participated in separate classrooms for the first hour and 45 minutes. Each of the adult and youth classes was facilitated by two trained facilitators. In these settings participants learned age-appropriate information regarding healthy stepfamily functioning (e.g., communication, dealing with ex-spouse, empathy, etc.). The last 15 minutes of the class brought adults and their children together for a family-strengthening activity.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 14 facilitators who taught classes in Spanish for Latino participants at the end of the course offering. Not all responses to interview questions were used in the current study. Rather, only those responses referring to specific facilitation strategies were considered. Examples of questions were as follows: What were the major challenges in teaching this program? What were the major joys in teaching this program? What were the most successful strategies used for teaching this program? Facilitators were also asked to discuss recruitment and retention strategies used to recruit participants. Data from questions regarding how participants were recruited and retained into the stepfamily program have been previously published (see Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010).

The sample for this study was based on a convenient sample of Spanish-speaking facilitators who taught Latino participants in the *Smart Steps* program. Of the 14 facilitators interviewed, 12 were women. Eleven facilitators were Latino, whereas 3 were European American. Each facilitator had prior knowledge or experience in teaching family education courses with the average amount of experience being seven years. Additionally, all facilitators had some form of higher education, ranging from completing a trade or technical school to completing a postgraduate degree. Half of the facilitators were either engaged or married for the first time, five were remarried or engaged to be remarried, and two were single. Six of the 14 facilitators currently had stepchildren. Quantitative differences in facilitator responses could not be compared due to the limited size ( $N=14$ ) of the sample. However, no qualitative differences were found in facilitator responses based on ethnicity, sex, stepparenting status, and gender. Participating facilitators provided informed consent to be part of the evaluation process before being interviewed. For the interviews the statewide project manager selected facilitators from different family agencies around the state based on availability. Interviews were conducted by trained research assistants after the completion of the 6-week *Smart Steps* course. Recorded interviews were transcribed by bilingual research assistants.

Transcribed interviews were analyzed using the procedures described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). Following this qualitative methodology, the researchers immersed themselves in the data, reading and rereading the transcribed interviews. Coding categories were developed during the reading process that reflected the common themes described by respondents. Coding categories, which reflected these themes, were agreed on by three researchers and independently coded. Coding was completed using Nvivo 8 qualitative software (QSR International, 2008). These codes were then compared to identify reliability across researchers with codes having less than 80% agreement being reevaluated to ensure accurate reliability among the researchers.

This study is part of a larger project that focuses on the different aspects of participant and facilitator experiences in a federally funded stepfamily education program. Other studies stemming from the same project have evaluated the recruitment and retention of stepfamilies (see Skogrand et al., 2010), benefits of the group-formatted intervention (Skogrand, Torres, & Higginbotham, 2010), outcomes for married and unmarried stepcouples (Higginbotham & Skogrand, 2010), and perceived benefits for children (Higginbotham, Skogrand, & Torres, 2010). This study differs from previous studies in that it uses qualitative data of facilitators to help identify best-practice strategies for facilitating classes with Latino participants.

## RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the strategies used by facilitators in teaching Latino participants in a stepfamily RE program. The findings for this study are grouped into two major themes, which emerged from the data: (1) classroom management/approach and (2) modification of program curriculum. Within each of these major themes, subthemes were identified and listed in order of prevalence.

### Classroom Management/Approach

Every facilitator who was interviewed discussed the most successful strategies in teaching the *Smart Steps* course to Latino stepfamilies. In discussing facilitation strategies, three subthemes emerged from the data: encouraging class discussion and sharing, applying cultural understanding, and recognizing the importance of the parent-child relationship.

#### ENCOURAGING CLASS DISCUSSION AND SHARING

All 14 facilitators discussed how class discussion and sharing was an important factor in creating effective learning for Latino participants. Creating a comfortable and friendly group dynamic was critical. This group dynamic

assisted the facilitators in eliciting comments from the class participants. One facilitator indicated as follows:

It is part of the group, a good dynamic. They [the participants] felt from the beginning that if you open up and facilitate communication between each other . . . they got to see each other and to feel the comfort of the group. That's why the group is wonderful for those [communication] processes.

Facilitators described using group discussion as a means of creating a strong group bond. For example, one facilitator stated, "It was that time to allow parents to share their experiences, to learn from each other, and to see how they bond as a group."

In addition to creating a strong group bond, facilitators indicated that by encouraging group discussion and sharing they were able to assist individuals in personalizing and applying the information learned to their own situation. This was articulated by a facilitator:

We have the opportunity to personalize information and give them opportunities to express [themselves]. That's when it comes to not just stories or a bunch of information, but something real for them, and something to do with their situation and with their lives . . . and give them the chance to express [their experiences] to different families.

#### APPLYING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Another strategy that was emphasized by 9 of the 14 facilitators was the importance of having an understanding of Latino culture in general and applying that knowledge to Latino stepfamilies. Facilitators discussed stepfamily issues in the context of the Latino culture. This was illustrated by one facilitator who compared the Spanish stepfamily program to other Spanish programs offered by their agency:

A lot of the families that we had in those [other] programs were stepfamilies as well. They would bring up issues that other traditional families would not have and so there was a need for something specific, particularly in the Latino culture.

Facilitators additionally pinpointed specific issues that were found to be culturally difficult for some of the Latino stepfamilies in the *Smart Steps* classes. Although not present among all Latino stepfamilies, one example as described by a facilitator included the absence of a biological parent after divorce:

Where the culture comes in is the fact that most Hispanic fathers, when they leave the home or get divorced, don't want to know anything.



They're not fighting over custody. The other parent disappeared almost completely from the map, so there wasn't that [ex-spouse] issue [in comparison] with the other cultures.

Several facilitators noted that children were not always aware of their stepfamily status. Facilitators suspected parents would hide or protect their kids from knowledge about their family structure because of cultural stigma. As one facilitator stated, "In the Hispanic community, there's a little bit more of a taboo of this type of relationship: marriage and stepkids, stepsons or daughters. Some of them didn't want their kids to know they were a stepson or daughter."

Facilitators were also aware of Latino cultural characteristics affecting these families, such as personalism, defined as "an orientation to treating others with respect and dignity" (Halgunseth, 2006, p. 340). This awareness guided facilitators in building trust and understanding with participants on an individual basis. As one facilitator stated, "Treat each case on a case-by-case basis. Work with them, have a bit of personal communication afterwards, talking to them. Getting to know what their situation is before they get here."

#### RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Half of the facilitators in this study indicated that strengthening the parent-child relationship was essential in effectively facilitating a Latino stepfamily program. While discussing parent-child communication in the Latino culture one facilitator stated, "[Parents and children] can develop that relationship together and [facilitators need to] encourage talking to each other... encourage the dialogue among the children." Facilitators discussed how the structure of the class facilitated parent-child interaction. For example, one facilitator stated, "To me at the end, we would ask the children if they were enjoying the class. It felt good if they said, 'Yeah, me and my stepdad are talking.'"

#### Modification of Program Curriculum

In addition to the actual facilitation of the stepfamily program, 12 of the 14 facilitators emphasized the importance of having a flexible and adaptive curriculum. Facilitators felt "the [*Smart Steps*] curriculum was very well set out" and emphasized the importance of flexibility in order to meet the specific needs and situations of the Latino participants. For example, one facilitator stated how helpful it was that "the curriculum is not so strict that we had to present every single slide or every single piece of information. It was flexible to the parent's experience."

Although the curriculum seemed to work well overall, several facilitators found a need for minor changes. For example, although facilitators

thought the activities in the stepfamily class were well intended, some did not necessarily work well with Latino stepfamilies. For example, one facilitator stated, "Some of the 'ice breaker' activities didn't always work for us, so they developed their own . . . the newlywed game [for example]." Other facilitators suggested the activities needed to be more "hands on."

Other issues raised by the facilitators included the translation of the curriculum from English to Spanish. It should be noted, the original translation of the *Smart Steps* curriculum was done by an Argentine translator. Because Spanish terms and phrases can differ from country to country (e.g., Argentina vs. Mexico), several facilitators complained, "The translation wasn't good in Spanish. It was mostly words with the wrong meaning, and some words did not exist in Spanish," whereas other words were in "Spanglish." The absence of a universally recognized Spanish term for "stepfamily" was also a source of frustration. This issue was described by one facilitator stating, "There is not a word for stepfamilies . . . the word 'ensambladas' means an assembly, so you think of a production facility. So the real word is 'reconstruidas,' reconstituted families."

A final modification that was addressed by facilitators was the need for more culturally appropriate pictures and movies. One facilitator observed, "The videos were so good, but they were sometimes more for Anglo people than for Latinos." Even though the movies displayed important stepfamily issues, they did not portray Latino families, and, consequently, facilitators found participants struggling to relate. As one facilitator stated, "The cultures are totally different," and emphasized the need to incorporate culturally appropriate videos and slides.

## DISCUSSION

In light of the need for more research that targets "under-researched and underserved" populations, specifically those that are "ethnically diverse" and of "differing family types" (Administration of Children and Families, 2005), this study verifies strategies for effective facilitation when teaching Latino participants in a stepfamily RE program. In this section, each of the major subthemes is discussed as they relate to the current literature regarding effective facilitation and stepfamily education with Latino families.

### Classroom Management/Approach

Three subthemes emerged under the umbrella theme of facilitators' classroom management and approach. These were encouraging class discussion and sharing, applying cultural understanding, and recognizing the importance of the parent-child relationship.

## ENCOURAGING CLASS DISCUSSION AND SHARING

Facilitators emphasized the importance of promoting class discussion and encouraging participation and sharing of experiences within the stepfamily program. Specifically, the facilitators found that through class discussion and sharing an effective, comfortable, and friendly learning environment was created. The group dynamic assisted in creating a place where participants could share, learn, and bond with one another. These findings are consistent with previous findings regarding the benefits of social support and participation in a group formatted RE program (Adler-Baeder, Robertson, & Schramm, 2010; Skogrand et al., 2010). Skogrand and colleagues found that a group-formatted intervention not only provided families with the opportunity to be taught but also allows for them to assist in teaching others during the class. The current study adds to previous findings by providing the perspective of the facilitators. Facilitators perceived their efforts to stimulate group discussion, which led to participants' communication, personalization, and application of information contained in the course.

Facilitators emphasized how creating a group dynamic also led to a strong group bond. The perceived importance of a group bond likely stems from cultural characteristics of collectivism and familism. Latino culture is known to value interdependence and inclusion of individuals into the larger community (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2008). Consequently, reports from these facilitators are consistent with other research that emphasizes the need to create "group camaraderie" among participants in having a successful RE program (Michaels, 2000; Nicholson, Phillips, Whitton, Halford, & Sanders, 2007). As described by Skogrand et al. (2009), an important cultural characteristic of the Latino culture is familism, which can be cultivated through the use of discussion and sharing. Familism emphasizes the cultural values of having a "cohesive bond" and "cooperation" among a group (Coltrane et al., 2008; p. 107). Therefore, one might conclude that the use of discussion and sharing, which is incorporated into most general RE programs, is as important—or even more important—for Latinos because it is highly valued in their culture.

## APPLYING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Historically, scholars have emphasized the importance of providing culturally appropriate programs to families of diverse cultural backgrounds (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). In facilitating a RE program to Latino stepfamilies, these facilitators applied their own knowledge and experiences about the Latino culture and stepfamilies to assist participants in learning and understanding the material. Understanding Latino values such as familism and collectivism as well as other identified cultural values in the literature including personalismo, machismo, and the role of religion may all play a part in facilitating RE to Latino stepfamilies (Coltrane et al., 2008; Falcov, 1998; Skogrand et al.,

2008; Skogrand et al., 2009). Cultural sensitivity is necessary to adequately serve those within the Latino population (Falcov, 1998).

In addition to understanding the cultural values and characteristics that apply to the majority of Latino families, understanding the Latino culture in regard to stepfamilies specifically was found to be important in teaching Latino stepfamilies. According to Ganong and Coleman (2004), the cultural context in which stepfamilies live greatly affects the different aspects of stepfamily life, including how they think, feel, and interact with one another; therefore, both Latino and stepfamily culture should be taken into consideration when facilitating RE programs to stepfamilies. For example, some Latino stepfamilies may mimic the nuclear family structure or possibly conceal their stepfamily status to meet the cultural values of familism, avoid social stigmas, or meet the expectations of remaining married as emphasized by culturally predominate religious institutions (Coltrane et al., 2008; Skogrand et al., 2009).

A cultural consideration that was discussed in the findings of this study was the relative absence of the biological father in raising his children after remarriage. Although many Latino fathers remain very involved with their children after divorce, the observations noted in the qualitative interviews coincides with research comparing European American and Mexican American biological fathers. Comparatively, in a study by Coltrane and colleagues (2008), Mexican American fathers were found to have more distant or strained relationship with their children who were living with their mother and stepfather. Additionally, Mexican American birth fathers rarely had contact or a strong relationship with the child's current parents (i.e., biological mother and stepfather). Coltrane's quantitative data corroborates what *Smart Steps* facilitators observed regarding some biological birth fathers becoming disengaged when remarriage occurs. Although many Latino biological fathers continue to be involved after divorce and remarriage, one implication of the present study is that some of the material in the *Smart Steps* curriculum may not be seen as relevant to some Latino stepfamilies. For example, coparenting across households may be a nonissue if a biological parent lives in another country or is otherwise uninvolved. Facilitators teaching Latino stepfamilies should try to be aware of these unique family dynamics and adapt time spent on curriculum topics to assist in participants specific needs.

Finally, facilitators applied their cultural understanding by gaining and maintaining trust with their participants. In this sense, facilitators used one-on-one communication to get to know the participants and to gain trust. These findings corroborate the current literature that emphasizes an array of strategies for maintaining trust among Latino participants including: greeting participants, handing out papers individually, providing materials in the appropriate language and reading level, understanding immigration issues, providing personal communication such as cards or phone calls, and using trusted staff members and organizations (Clutter & Nieto, n.d.; Skogrand et al., 2009, 2010).

## RECOGNIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIP

As part of the stepfamily program, facilitators had the opportunity to work with parents and children individually, as well as together. Through this type of program structure, where both parents and children participate in age-appropriate education and family activities, facilitators observed that parent–child relationships were enhanced. The family is highly valued within Latino culture and children are an integral part of a healthy marriage (Skogrand et al., 2009). Because of this importance it has been suggested that Latino families would be unlikely to attend educational programming without their children present (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007).

Findings from this study support previous suggestions that children be included in stepfamily education (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Facilitators emphasized the importance of strengthening the parent–child relationship and found that one way to facilitate this was through increased communication between the parents and children. Similar to findings by Higginbotham et al. (2010) who interviewed adult participants, the facilitators in this study noted the benefits children received through participation, including creating open discussion among the children about their feelings, learning empathy, and learning how to express themselves in appropriate ways. Additionally, facilitators in this study found that providing a “supportive educational environment” assisted in creating a positive experience for sharing feelings between parents and children. Stepfamily RE therefore can provide a safe environment where open dialogue can occur between parents and children as well as provide the necessary skills needed to enhance communication between parents and children.

## Modification of Program Curriculum

Findings from this study support previous recommendations that program curriculum be selected based on the participants’ needs (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). However, current research on RE targeting stepfamilies has lacked in distinguishing the different needs among European American and minority groups in regard to program content. Skogrand et al. (2009) provided information regarding specific modifications that should be considered for program curriculum when targeting Latino stepfamilies. For example, the importance of providing culturally appropriate pictures and cartoons that “poke fun” at the stepfamily should be avoided among Latino populations because of the strong family and religious values (i.e., the family is sacred) held by many members of the Latino culture. The facilitators in the present study also recommended that the program curriculum be more culturally appropriate through media that portray Latino families. Additionally, facilitators struggled with some of the translations of the curriculum. It may be advisable to use a “cultural guide,” someone from the targeted cultural

group who can review program material in advance to identify potential translation problems and provide direction to additional resources (Skogrand et al., 2009).

This study also confirms the difficulty, from the facilitator's role, with the "stepfamily" term or lack thereof in Spanish among Latino participants. Because the Spanish language and culture do not typically include the term "stepfamily," it may be difficult for program participants to identify with the term when it is used in a RE. Program participants may hold a negative stigma toward terms that refer to their family as being anything other than natural, normal, and sacred. Efforts to attract Latino stepfamilies by calling attention to their step, blended, or combined status may hinder program recruitment, implementation, and facilitation. Preprogram orientations can be used to explain the program and receive feedback regarding any problems that could arise from the use of the term "stepfamily" (Skogrand et al., 2009). Additionally, program facilitators should be sensitive to differing perceptions of family structures and regional idiomatic differences by using an array of terms that may more appropriately capture the diversity of these families. Some possible terms include "Todas as Familias" (all families), "Familas Neuva" (new families), "Familias Combinadas" (combined families), or "Familias con Hijastros" (families with stepchildren).

Finally, the interviews in this study further support the recommendation program curriculum should be flexible and adaptive for the Latino population. Facilitators in this study discussed the importance of the flexibility provided by the *Smart Steps* curriculum and how it could be adapted or changed to fit the group served. Because of the differences among cultures, what works for one culture may not work for another (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007).

### Creating Culturally Appropriate RE

Best practices point to RE needing to be culturally appropriate for the targeted population. In becoming culturally appropriate, RE facilitators should consider the differing strengths of the targeted population, the program itself, and the culture. For example, in the ecological model developed by DeFrain and Asay (2007b), a framework is described in which family, community, and cultural strengths interact. In examining each of these strengths, facilitators can become more aware of how to be culturally appropriate in serving families.

First, family strengths (microsystem) incorporate the qualities needed in maintaining strong and satisfying family relationships. These strengths include having appreciation and affection for one another within the family, positive communication, enjoyed time together, and the ability to manage stress and crisis (DeFrain & Asay, 2007b). As demonstrated through the findings of this study, facilitators in the *Smart Steps* program were able to build on the strengths of Latino stepfamilies by fostering healthy communication,

allowing families to spend time together, and teaching relationship skills needed to maintain healthy and happy stepfamilies.

Second, RE programs can play an essential role in supporting community strengths (exosystem). Community strengths include having a supportive environment that values and is willing to help the family, an effective education system, religious communities that can provide desired support, family-service programs, and a safe, secure, and healthy environment. RE programming can help families gain the assistance they need when other resources are unavailable. For example, Latino families may not have the social support needed to assist them in their stepfamily situations and these community resources can provide such support. Facilitators, therefore, should foster an environment in which stepfamilies are encouraged and allowed to provide each other with social support (DeFrain & Asay, 2007b).

Finally, facilitators need to understand the cultural strengths (macrosystem) in which Latino families exist. This includes cultural history, shared cultural meanings, and an understanding of the global society. As demonstrated by facilitators in this study, having an understanding of the cultural meaning of stepfamilies as well as the role that cultural values play was important in serving these stepfamilies. To accomplish this, RE programs should be aware of the demographic differences of the population in which they serve (e.g., country-of-origin, acculturation, history, etc.) (DeFrain & Asay, 2007b).

Each of these strengths supports and reinforces the other. By understanding each ecological system and the strengths therein, facilitators can more effectively demonstrate cultural sensitivity in teaching families through RE.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides new insights into the experiences of RE facilitators who taught Latino stepfamilies; however, it is important to recognize the limitations of the current study. Because of the nature of the study and limited scope of the evaluation tools, demographic information such as country-of-origin and acculturation were not asked of the facilitators. Because there is great diversity within the Latino population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008), the findings from this study may not be generalizable to all Latinos, including those from differing countries, and levels of acculturation (Clutter & Nieto, n.d.). Similarly, the findings from this study are from one group of facilitators and therefore may not be applicable to stepfamily education facilitators in other states or who use different curricula.

Future research should further examine the relevance of the findings from this study to differing groups of Latinos and other RE programs.

Additionally, research is needed on the impact of participants' and facilitators' acculturation, country-of-origin, and perceived stigmatization on program outcomes. Without further investigation in these areas, facilitators will be limited in their effectiveness in serving differing Latino stepfamily populations.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings from this study suggest support for several existing best-practice recommendations for Latino stepfamily education as proposed by Skogrand et al. (2009):

- Facilitators should promote class discussion and sharing among participants.
- Facilitators should understand the culture and cultural values with which they are teaching. Latino values such as familism should be incorporated to better facilitate stepfamily programs serving Latinos.
- Developing a trusting relationship between program staff/organizations and participants is important for initiating and maintaining relationships throughout the program.
- Children are an important aspect of the Latino culture and Latino families. Therefore, stepfamily education serving Latino families should incorporate the entire family.
- RE program should incorporate safeguards to overcome cultural issues regarding the "stepfamily" term. Programs may need to expand the terms that they use in describing Latino stepfamilies to soften any negative feelings attached with the stepfamily term.

Facilitators in this study also validated several recommendations by Skogrand et al. (2009) regarding curriculum and programmatic resources:

- Program curriculum should be flexible and adaptive to the population being served. Activities should be adjusted with the culture of the population in mind.
- Translation of program curriculum should be clear and culturally appropriate. A cultural expert should review the curriculum to ensure translation issues are avoided. Translation should be adapted to the targeted population and an array of stepfamily terms should be used, according to the preference and comfort level of participants.
- Pictures and audio visuals should incorporate the targeted population. When serving Latino families, pictures and videos should be reflective of the population.

The experiences of the interviewed facilitators pointed to the importance of stepfamily RE offerings that combine skill-based learning with group learning. Group learning, particularly for Latinos, appears to facilitate the learning processing via insights and understanding from other participants



(*cf.* Dion et al., 2003; Skogrand et al., 2010). This approach is further bolstered by the stepfamily literature that indicates many stepfamilies feel isolated in our society (Ganong & Coleman, 2004) and that Latino stepfamilies, in particular, may have negative or uncomfortable feelings about their stepfamily status (Coltrane et al., 2008).

Lessons learned from this study may be incorporated into new and existing RE programs. However, this should be done with the strengths based perspective in mind. Additionally, facilitators should be aware of both the micro and macro factors that may have an effect on the programs targeted population (e.g., culture, religion, etc.). Facilitating with this approach should help RE programs serve Latino families more effectively and appropriately.

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