Commentary

Making the Most of Your Revista Lamaze: Culturally Responsive Teaching for Hispanic Clients

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Abstract

The traditional classroom in many Latin American countries does not overtly support an environment of discussion, reflection, and analysis—the foundation of a Lamaze education. Even when working with couples from cultures that reflect learning styles different from our own, it is possible for the childbirth educator to be faithful to the goals of Lamaze education by changing the way in which information is presented and by encouraging learner participation. By using *Revista Lamaze*, combined with culturally appropriate teaching techniques, a childbirth educator can successfully educate Hispanic couples without offending their culture.

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Teaching is an always challenging, always evolving profession. As educators, our skills and knowledge are tested at each classroom encounter. What works with one group inevitably fails with the next. Until recently, however, there was one variable that did not change: Childbirth educators in the United States taught a fairly homogenous population of Anglo couples who were born and educated in the United States. These couples were familiar with our teaching methods and shared similar learning styles. Now, more than 30 years after the establishment of childbirth education as a profession, classes have taken on a more culturally diverse and ethnically rich makeup. As a result, the childbirth educator may be suddenly faced, often without adequate preparation, with the challenge of adapting her teaching to a variety of ethnic groups and cultures (Jiménez, 1995).

Hispanics are one of the most prominent and fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States today. Between 1980 and 1990, the Hispanic population of the United States increased 53%, while the total population of the country increased only 9% (Jiménez, 1995). It is expected that by the year 2050, the Hispanic population will make up 24.5% of the population of the United States, an increase attributed in large part to high birthrates among Hispanic women (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census [USDC], 1997). Given these statistics, it is inevitable that many non-Hispanic perinatal educators will face the challenge of educating Hispanic couples about the joys and benefits of prepared childbirth. Doing so in a culturally responsive manner will be the responsibility of those who have chosen to meet the challenge.

When working with couples from diverse cultural backgrounds, it will immediately become apparent to the childbirth educator that all that was familiar and safe no longer applies. The teaching methods that were effective with well-educated Anglo clients may intimidate or fail to reach Hispanic couples who were exposed to different learning modalities.

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The foundation of a Lamaze education is quite specific. It adheres to the belief that birth is a normal and natural process, and that a woman's inner wisdom will guide her through the process with dignity, clarity, and confidence. This philosophy requires a certain degree of responsibility from those who embrace and teach it. Depending on their prior conditioning, knowledge, and cultural myths and traditions, some ethnic groups will have greater success than others in making this foundational premise a reality in their lives.

All women must go through the process of analyzing their thoughts, fears, attitudes, and knowledge toward pregnancy and birth. In the Hispanic culture, however, in which bearing a child and becoming a mother is highly revered, culturally bound myths and traditions have an

even more profound impact on the birth experience. Responding to these deeply engrained traditions and beliefs, combined with a different set of educational experiences and expectations, imposes many demands on the childbirth educator.

Language, of course, is yet one more obstacle the educator must overcome before successfully delivering Lamaze education to an ever-growing Hispanic clientele. *Revista Lamaze*¹ can successfully educate Hispanic couples by addressing what is meaningful within their culture while encouraging a new openness that may inspire personal change. The key to a successful program, however, is not always content but, rather, offering a culturally relevant presentation.

If a program is not presented in accordance with the learning styles and expectations of the student, no matter how valuable the information is, the educator may lose a unique opportunity to impart knowledge and to change perceptions. When working with people from other ethnic backgrounds, it is imperative that the educator present the information in a style appropriate to the culture of the people addressed. It is equally important, however, for Lamaze-trained educators to remain faithful to the foundation of a Lamaze education. It has been written that "Lamaze classes do not simply provide information; they provide the forum for thoughtful discussion, reflection, and analysis" (Lothian, 1997, p. viii).

Any Lamaze educator would agree that the environment Dr. Lothian describes is ideal for the childbirth education classroom. However, the traditional classroom in many Latin American countries does not overtly support an atmosphere of discussion, reflection, and analysis. The educational system in place in many Spanish-speaking countries establishes the teacher as the authority figure, placing her in front of the classroom to lecture to a group of respectful but passive students. The students are expected to copy information from the blackboard and then memorize facts and concepts that will later be tested in a written exam. This passive style of learning, to which many Hispanic couples have become accustomed, is very different from the Lamaze philosophy. "The goals and content of Lamaze mandate educational methods that actively involve families in the

¹*Revista Lamaze* is the Spanish version of *Lamaze Parents Magazine* and can be obtained by calling the Lamaze Publishing Company at 800-832-0277.

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process of learning, allowing time for reflection, discussion, problem solving, and decision making” (Lothian, 1997, p. ix).

However, even when the childbirth educator works with couples from cultures that reflect learning styles and expectations different from her own, it is possible to remain faithful to the goals of a Lamaze education. The childbirth educator can work to change the traditional presentation to classes without changing the philosophy of making students active and inquisitive learners. As the childbirth educator mutually learns from her students’ culture, she can also teach them what is valuable from her own. She can gently remove students from their familiar expectations and offer them stimulating, thought-provoking presentations that allow for the reflection, discussion, and problem solving that are such valuable components of a Lamaze education—and, to be effective, she must do so with the utmost respect and appreciation for their culture.

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The childbirth educator should allow her students to become comfortable with her teaching method in an environment that is pleasant for them. In accordance with their own tradition and comfort level, the first activity should be serious, formal, and teacher-centered. Once the childbirth educator has gained the confidence of her students, she may then begin to experiment with other less formal and more creative ways of imparting knowledge. The following is a description of techniques this

author has found useful when working with parents of Hispanic origin.

Begin the transition to creativity slowly but surely with the article from *Revista Lamaze* entitled “Confie en su Cuerpo” (“Trust Your Body”). This piece is the perfect start, as well as the perfect ending, for a childbirth series because the information is so valuable that its theme is easily worked into each and every class. To do so effectively in a culturally appropriate manner, however, is not as simple as merely providing the information and hoping for some meaningful discussion. The childbirth educator should be aware that she will likely be faced with student reticence at the beginning of the series. However, she can eventually coax the students into discussion by giving them something to be excited about. The written word is informative, but the impact of a visual image is much more powerful. A combination of the two will make the message unforgettable.

One technique is to project the information embodied in “Confie en su Cuerpo” in a highly visual format on the screen. Isolate key phrases from the article, and mix this written communication with carefully chosen slides of women in various stages of labor that represent the messages being presented. Such a visual presentation will serve as a catalyst for a more meaningful, active discussion of the topic. In addition, the darkness necessary to project the slides will provide a layer of protection and anonymity not afforded by the bright lights of a classroom. Where once the childbirth educator was confronted with reticent students reluctant to engage in discussion, it is hoped that she will now enjoy a more lively and vital exchange of thoughts, questions, fears, and information.

The title “Confie en su Cuerpo” encompasses the message the childbirth educator wants to portray: A woman can trust her body regardless of its shape or size. Other themes such as “Confia en tu propia capacidad de parir” (“Have confidence in your ability to give birth”) and “Confia en tu propia sabiduría” (“Have confidence in your own wisdom”) can be related as well. The childbirth educator should show pictures of a variety of women in labor and discuss how the women pictured are portraying confidence in the natural process of birthing their babies. Also, the childbirth educator should ask how these images of women giving birth are different from the ones they may already have imprinted on their memory.

The presentation can be continued by talking about

“Dejar que la naturaleza tome su curso” (“Letting nature take its course”), “Mantenerse en armonía con los ritmos de tu cuerpo” (“Being in harmony with the rhythms of your body”), and “Experimentar la paz interior que te brindará fuerza y resistencia” (“Experiencing an internal peace that gives strength and resistance”). All of these messages should be illustrated with pictures of women who are strong and in control and who are following the natural rhythms of their bodies with dignity and peace. Obviously, the intention here is to begin creating positive images of birth, while slowly dissipating the negative Hollywood versions that have been allowed to become the prevalent view of birth in many cultures, including the Hispanic.

With the intention of going beyond the themes first presented, the childbirth educator can proceed with some more thought-provoking messages. She can encourage self-reflection and analysis with “Descubre el poder que reside en el acto de dar a luz” (“Discover the power that resides in the act of giving birth”). A powerful image can be projected with this thought and can be followed by the question “How is it possible that there is power in the act of giving birth?” This discussion will surely lead into the next one included in the message: “Siente la emoción de la experiencia” (“Feel the emotion of the experience of giving birth”). Many couples who have never connected positive emotions with the process of giving birth will react to this statement because it challenges them to a different way of thinking. After having given the idea some thought, students will usually agree that there is a powerful and positive emotion in the birth experience.

A presentation such as this will likely leave the students with a wide range of feelings. The childbirth educator will have subtly touched the very emotional core that is so endearingly Hispanic. Having come in expecting to sit back and half listen to their teacher talk about pregnancy and childbirth, the students will leave the first night having participated in a multisensory experience. This encounter will leave them with a positive impression not only of their childbirth education class but also of the birth process itself. By understanding and appealing to the strengths and emotions of the culture in which she is working, the childbirth educator will most likely successfully enhance the classroom experience.

An indisputable strength of the members of the Hispanic community is their cooperation with and enjoy-

ment of each other. Group work is an effective teaching strategy for the inherently social, gregarious Hispanic population. As a group, they tend to assimilate the material and perform much better when they are allowed opportunities for cooperative learning. Understanding this about the culture, the childbirth educator may choose to adapt her teaching style to fit the Hispanic need for socialization and group participation.

Cooperative learning can be fostered effectively when presenting the second article in *Revista Lamaze*, “Cómo Dominar Las Técnicas Lamaze” (“Mastering Lamaze Skills”). By the time the childbirth educator presents this article, it is hoped she will have gained her students’ confidence and trust in her as an educator. By the second or third class, it is appropriate to step further back from the traditional teacher-centered role and allow students to become active learners.

Instead of lecturing about the benefits and mechanics of Lamaze techniques, the childbirth educator can assign various questions and topics to groups of two or three couples, making them responsible for understanding the information and then presenting it to the class. This technique not only allows students to become active learners but also provides the opportunity for them to get to know each other better. As students get to know each other and begin to trust their childbirth educator, their inhibitions will slowly loosen, and laughter will replace reticence.

After the students have studied the theory and mechanics of breathing and relaxation in their cooperative groups and have validated or clarified their understanding through whole-group discussion, one of them can be invited to demonstrate breathing patterns to the rest of the class. It is especially fun to have one of the fathers volunteer. As a result, not only does he make his wife proud, but in his own way, he also demonstrates to her that he will be able to coach her through her breathing when the time comes and that he is interested and attentive to the information being presented.

The presentation of the material included in “Como Dominar las Técnicas Lamaze” is not complete until the theory and mechanics of pushing are successfully presented. Due to the inherent modesty of the culture, however, many Hispanic women are uncomfortable practicing or demonstrating pushing techniques. Nonetheless, they will likely participate in the activity as part of a larger group, especially if the comfort level has been

raised through prior cooperative activities. The following exercise is somewhat unconventional, but it has worked successfully:

Rather than asking a woman to be the unwilling model for a pushing demonstration, the childbirth educator can ask one of the less inhibited fathers to “coach” another even less inhibited father through the breathing and mechanics of pushing. The father who is serving as coach should be instructed to lift his partner’s shoulders to achieve a more favorable position. This demonstration teaches the students how to adapt a Lamaze method to the reality of giving birth in some of the more traditional hospitals. Through this exercise, the mother is guarded from any potential embarrassment, and the father will come to more fully understand the discomfort his wife will experience as she pushes their baby into the world. After all, experience is the greatest and most humbling teacher, and this is a positive and culturally appropriate experience for all.

All educators strive for positive experiences. Sometimes, achieving meaningful encounters is as simple as modifying a pre-established activity such as the traditional breathing and relaxation session. The article “Posiciones de Parto” (“Birthing Positions”) provides a unique opportunity to combine breathing and relaxation with comfort positions for labor. Weaving nicely into the theme of trusting the body, this piece presents birth positions that can be practiced and discussed in the classroom.

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Instead of having couples lie on the floor during relaxation and breathing sessions, the childbirth educator can encourage them to experience a number of different positions as they practice their breathing. This variation will also be culturally appropriate with Hispanic couples who tend not to be as comfortable as Anglos are with the informality of lying on the floor during class. The childbirth educator can try having the father sit on the floor with his back supported against the wall and with his wife resting up against him. In this sitting position, the

students can practice the patterns they have already been introduced to in their reading and during class discussion. Sitting positions may vary from chair to floor in order to allow students the full range of options available for relieving the tension of their contractions.

Once they are familiar with breathing patterns, the couples can engage in other comfort measures such as standing and embracing as the mom continues to breathe through simulated contractions. They can kiss and hold hands, and they can walk and dance. Movement and physical closeness are especially appealing to Hispanic couples. The slow dancing encourages a rocking motion that eases the baby down the birth canal. It is soothing and rhythmic, and it distracts as it comforts. Fathers enjoy this measure, too, because they are able to participate with their wives in an activity they enjoy. Sometimes, the childbirth educator can play a lively salsa and, on other occasions, choose a soothing slow dance. It is always advisable to select music from the students’ culture. We all connect to the music of our country; it is nurturing in its familiarity.

While the couples dance and walk and breathe and dream, slides of other couples engaging in the same activity can be shown. The childbirth educator can remind the couples that they are not alone in this experience and allow them to see that others from their own community have gone through this experience before them. Many more will come after them. The students can be reminded that they form part of a continuing flow of new life and evolving situations. It is particularly important for Hispanic couples to see other Hispanic couples in the slides presented in class. So much of the material that is currently available shows white Anglo couples experiencing the joy of prepared childbirth. The subtle message these materials may project is that it is normal for Americans to experience childbirth in this new and exciting way, but it is not normal for Hispanics especially since they seem absent from the scene. The more positive and culturally relevant reinforcement the childbirth educator provides, the more positive the impact she will have in other cultures.

It is important for Hispanics to see not only like role models during childbirth, but also positive images of Hispanic fathers caring for and nurturing their newborn child. The position of the mother is so revered in Hispanic society that the father is often given lesser importance and not as much prestige. Each new image

Hispanic fathers see of other Hispanic fathers interacting with their babies will reinforce the value of the father's participation in his child's care from birth.

Traditions change slowly; the evolution of the Hispanic father has been no exception. The article "Cuidando de su Recién Nacido" ("Caring for Your Newborn") can begin to change attitudes and to develop parenting skills that have historically fallen within the realm of motherhood in many traditional societies. The childbirth educator can begin examining cultural values and attitudes by engaging her students in a discussion of traditional roles and how they see those roles changing in their generation. Then she can allow for an active demonstration of childcare techniques, using the information provided in "Cuidando de su Recién Nacido." The fathers can learn how to hold a baby, change a diaper, and bathe their precious newborn. Slowly but surely, the childbirth educator will begin to transform the dynamics of the Hispanic family through their participation in childbirth education.

By preserving the positive of a culture's traditions and norms and appropriately transforming others, we are seeing a new generation of concerned, active Hispanic fathers and prepared, confident Hispanic mothers. The world can only benefit from such reflection, discussion, practice, and analysis—the foundation of a Lamaze education.

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A Note from the Editor

For another childbirth educator's point of view on serving the Hispanic community, readers may also be interested in the article "Dar a Luz: A Case Study in Outreach" in *The Journal of Perinatal Education* (5)1, 21-24. Author Linda B. Jenkins, BSN, PHN, LCCE, tells her story of producing culturally-sensitive media for Spanish-speaking audiences.

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Accepting Cultural Differences

We learn about one another's culture the same way we learn about sex: in the streets.

—Ishmael Reed

When you travel, remember that a foreign country is not designed to make you comfortable. It is designed to make its own people comfortable.

—Clifton Fadiman

It is just as damaging to think you are superior as it is to think you are inferior. People who think they are superior often find it difficult, if not impossible, to learn from others or to profit from their own mistakes.

—Allen Fay

The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn.

—Gloria Steinem