

A Look into the Homes of Spanish-Speaking Preschool Children

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1. Background

Parents are often titled their child's first teacher and the home their first classroom. Home literacy environment therefore must play a pivotal role in a young child's development of emergent literacy skills. Most children come into school with the ability to speak and communicate with their peers and teachers. Some children additionally have already learned skills such as color identification, counting, and the alphabet before they step into a classroom. What are the differences in the home environments of children who come into a preschool classroom with just enough ability to communicate and those who have advanced literacy skills?

Previous research has focused on the importance of parent involvement and home environment on children's success. Parents, regardless of race or social class, play a critical role in their child's education (Galper, Wigfield, & Seefeledt, 1997; Patrikakou, 1997). The importance of family in a child's success is evident across SES (Snow, Barns, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill, 1991). We know that families who are able to provide the child with cognitive, social, and cultural support will facilitate that child's ability to succeed in school (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) developed a framework for measuring home literacy environment stemming from previous research (Hess & Holloway, 1984 as cited in Hammer, Miccio, & Wagstaff, 2003). This framework consists of four main factors including the value placed by the family on literacy, expected achievement, availability and use of reading material, and parent-child book reading. Parent-child book reading is often linked to preschool children's language abilities. Payne, Whitehurst, and Angell (1994) found that home literacy environment in low-income families accounts for between 12% and 18.5% of the variance of child language at preschool. These researchers found that the highest correlation amounts from parent-child interactions around literacy. These interactions stem from high motivation by the parents for their children's school readiness. However, large variability in quality of the home literacy environment was found across low-income families.

Latinos have recently become the largest minority living within the United States. It is of great importance to understand that Latinos, although grouped into one category, are a very heterogeneous group. Their experiences are shaped, not by their general ethnic category, but by who they are, their immigration history, the life they left behind, along with their ability to assimilate into their new communities (Sanchez, 2002). Many Latinos in the United States are struggling with maintaining their home language along with learning and using the school and community language, English.

Hammer, Miccio, and Wagstaff (2003) looked at the relationship between home literacy environment in Puerto Rican families living in the mainland and the child's acquisition of English literacy skills. Factors they focused on include opportunities for instruction, speaking a home language in the home, low-socioeconomic status, and parent's support for literacy. Children exposed to both English and Spanish at home were exposed to more literacy related tasks than were children exposed only to Spanish at home. Hammer et al. attribute this difference to level of parental education and number of years living in the U.S. mainland. Families who have lived on the mainland for a longer period of time have begun to assimilate to this culture, which emphasizes school readiness. Latino culture views parents more as socializing agents (Zentella, 2002). Additionally Hammer et al. found that parents who pressed their children to achieve had children who performed better than those children whose parents were not as motivating.

1.1 Present Study

The present study furthers the research of Payne et al. (1994) and Hammer et al. (2003) by looking into the homes of low-income Spanish-speaking preschool children in determining their home literacy environment and the effect of these environments on children's language at the beginning of preschool. Spanish-speaking mothers with children who attended preschool in the United States were interviewed on language use, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations for their child's schooling and success, as well as immigration history and cultural influences. The purpose of the study is to better understand the home environment of a heterogeneous group of low-income Latino families living in the United States and how these environments play a role in children's language development, both in English and Spanish.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Children were drawn from a larger project, The Early Childhood Study of Language and Literacy Development of Spanish-speaking Children. This larger project is a longitudinal study following 500 Spanish-speaking children in Massachusetts, Maryland, and Puerto Rico from preschool through second grade. A main requirement for children to participate in the larger project is that someone in the child's home speaks Spanish. Children were chosen for the present study based on their location and their standardized vocabulary scores in both English and Spanish at entry into preschool.

Fifty-one children and their families participated in this study. These families come from thirteen countries or territories, including the United States, with the highest representation from the Dominican Republic and El Salvador. Twelve of the families are being reported on here for the qualitative analysis.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Family measures

The DELSS Parent Interview was created for use by the larger project in conjunction with a network of research projects focusing on the development of language in Spanish-speaking children. This phone interview provides demographic information about the family as well as indicates general home language and literacy resources available to the family.

The Language, Literacy, and Culture Questionnaire was developed for this study. It includes detailed questions related to language use in the home and home literacy exposure and support, as well as questions about parent's attitudes, expectations and involvement in their child's school, and cultural influences on these factors.

2.2.2 Child outcome measures

The Picture Vocabulary subtest of the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery Revised (WLPB-R) (Woodcock, 1991; Woodcock & Muñoz-Sandoval, 1994) is primarily a measure of expressive vocabulary with several items at the beginning of the assessment measuring receptive vocabulary. This subtest is administered in both English and Spanish.

2.3 Procedure

Families were recruited to participate based on their participation in a larger study, The Early Childhood Study of Language and Literacy Development of Spanish-speaking Children. Participation was limited to those children attending preschools in Boston and Framingham, MA as home visits would require traveling to the homes of these children. One hundred families were sent letters of recruitment. Fifty-one families were visited.

Families who agreed to participate were visited at home once. Each home visit took approximately 90 minutes. Parents were interviewed extensively on cultural factors, school involvement, expectations, and choices, interfamilial language use, literacy practices, and culture using the Language, Literacy, and Culture Questionnaire. The interviews were tape recorded for later transcription. Parents were compensated for their time. Once the interviews were transcribed, each interview was coded based on the questions from the interview as well as overlying themes evident throughout the interviews.

2.4 Statistical approach

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were completed. Quantitative analysis was performed with the information obtained from the DELLS Parent Interview as well as from categorical questions within the LLCQ. Frequency distributions were run in determining the variability of resources available to the families. Additionally these distributions indicated the variability in performance of language and literacy activities by all families.

Qualitative analysis was performed with the transcribed home interviews. Each interview was coded through a categorization method. Subsequently contextualization allowed for the comparison of major themes across interviews. Interviews were divided into groups based on the child's performance on a vocabulary subtest at entry into preschool. The interviews were therefore compared within group, focusing on the similarities with regard to major themes, and compared across groups, focusing on the dissimilarities across different groups.

3. Results

The interviews are divided into four categories based on the child's performance on a standardized measure of vocabulary. Category 1 children scored below the sample mean in both English and Spanish on this measure. Category 2 children scored below the sample mean in Spanish, but above the sample mean in English. Category 3 children scored above the sample mean in Spanish but below the sample mean in English. Category 4 children scored above the sample mean in both English and Spanish.

3.1 Quantitative results

Frequency distributions were calculated on all the families for four categorical variables including number of English and Spanish books in the home, number of years in the United States, and mean years of education. Category 1 reported the least number of books in either language. Families in category 2 reported the most number of books in the home in both English and Spanish. They also reported having lived the longest in the United States of all four groups. Category 3 parents have been in the United States the least amount of time. Finally category 4 had the parents with the highest number of years of education.

3.2 Qualitative results

Contextualizing the interviews based on related themes allowed for a description to be created for each of the four groups. Three participating families from each category are represented in these descriptions. Distinct differences can be noted with regard to attitudes, expectations, and practices across the categories. The role of schooling for young children is also discussed and ranges in goals for different families.

The families with children who performed below the sample mean in both languages (category 1) share a hands-off approach to education and the schooling process. A lack of discipline is apparent in the home with the expectation that the child will be both disciplined and socialized in a schooling context. There is however no mention of providing the child with the language and literacy skills she or he may need when they reach formal schooling. Parents are unsure of where the child may be

learning skills such as color, number, and letter identification. Excuses are often created for not interacting with children in such activities as sharing books. While this group lacks the resources, no effort is made to make do with what can be found in the home or to visit a local library.

Families in this category are speaking only Spanish in the home although neighbors or cousins may introduce English into the home. The mothers who were interviewed do not have a clear understanding with regard to language. They strongly believe that language develops naturally and language loss is not an option. However the child is gradually replacing his or her Spanish vocabulary with the new English words that he or she has learned making it difficult at times for mother and child to communicate.

The families with a child who performed above the sample mean in English and below the sample mean in Spanish (category 2) feel vehemently about their child being taught English at school. They view the role of school as a place for children to be socialized and instructed. They have also taken a role in instructing their children by reading to them and teaching them about letter-sound correspondence. They have weekly communication with their child's teacher and see the home and the school as partners in their child's education. At home, both English and Spanish are spoken and some of the mothers in this category were born in the United States but may have lived in their native country for several years before returning to the United States. Others have lived in the United States for a large time period, in comparison to the other categories.

The mothers in this category tend to base their opinions about their child's language development on their own personal experiences. They prefer that their child first learn English. However they also understand the importance of their child learning literacy skills in Spanish and hope to place him or her in a Spanish-language program once they have mastered English.

The families of children who performed above the sample mean in Spanish but below the sample mean in English (category 3) are taking a proactive role in maintaining their child's Spanish language skills. They view preschool both as a way of socializing their child and a venue for their children to learn English. However at home, the mothers are focusing on their child's Spanish. They read to the child in Spanish as well as teach him or her about letter-sound correspondence in Spanish. They are being creative in their obtainment of resources in Spanish, usually relying on relatives in other countries to supply them with material in Spanish. While the mothers are instilling a strong base in Spanish the fathers in these families are more interested in the child learning English. For them, English is seen as a window of opportunity to succeed in life. If you know English you can do anything. This philosophy has developed based on their struggle to succeed in the United States without knowing the language. Oftentimes however, the fathers are out working and have little impact in the education of their child.

The children in this category have started to experience a language shift after spending one year in an English-language preschool. The mothers are noticing and are concerned by the children's preference for English so early on and are determined to maintain their child's Spanish abilities. This may even include sending the child to their country of origin for summer vacation so that they may attend school there for two months or at least interact with family and friends who only speak Spanish.

The families of children who performed above the sample mean in both Spanish and English (category 4) understand the opportunities that are available for people who are bilingual. They have high expectations for their children in preschool. They expect their children to leave preschool as readers and writers. They are also taking a proactive role in teaching their children how to read and write. Besides reading with the child on a daily basis, they are also teaching their child the importance of reading in day-to-day life. Additionally they visit the library in order to provide their child with extra resources.

The families in this category have created a Spanish-only rule in the home. While English may be spoken with friends and neighbors and at school, Spanish must be spoken at home with the parents. This forces the children to learn to communicate and express themselves in both languages. There is a strong push in these families to maintain fluency in both languages. These children's teachers have also reinforced these ideas.

4. Discussion

Latinos have become the largest minority in the United States. This increase in the Latino population warrants some understanding as to the needs and concerns of this ethnic group. One major issue that abounds for this group is the heterogeneity of its members. Differences include country of origin, culture, education, language dialect, and immigration status. Each of these factors plays an important role in the daily life of Latinos living in the United States.

With the thriving immigration of Latino children, schools are beginning to see more diversity in their classrooms. Children with varying levels of English proficiency are being placed in English-only classrooms, with teachers who have little experience in working with English language learners. It is therefore important to understand whom these children are and what skills they are arriving with. With such varying abilities and background demographics, generalization is not an option.

This study provides an overview of Latino families whose children perform at varying proficiencies in both English and Spanish. Determining familial factors that play a role in children's language development will therefore allow for a better understanding of the diversity of this ethnic group and those factors conducive to language development. Important factors that have been pinpointed in this study as well as others in the past include immigration status, education, and motivation for achievement.

It is important to understand the immigration history of these families as an indicator of their placement in this society and their motivations for the development of their child's success. Families who have been in the United States the longest are more likely to place emphasis on the child's development of English skills. The parents may have already learned English and see this language as most important with regard to schooling and success. Although Spanish is their heritage language, these parents may feel as if the children can learn it later in life. These children are therefore performing better on English language tasks than on Spanish language tasks. These results parallel those of Hammer et al. (2003) who found that parents who had lived in the United States mainland the longest had a stronger focus on teaching their children English academic skills.

On the other hand, families who have been in the United States a short period of time feel that they have a better grasp of the Spanish language and therefore can better teach their child Spanish than attempt to teach them a language they are not as familiar with. These families take a proactive role in teaching their child Spanish. This is evident in both the parent's conversations as well as in the child's performance on Spanish language tasks.

Parent's level of education plays a role in their belief system with regard to child's education. Parents with higher levels of education want their children to also be highly educated and make informed choices as to the best way to provide such an education. Bilingualism is seen as an asset and it is important for these children to be able to communicate in both languages. Additionally resources are sought out to help these children learn and succeed. Emphasizing the importance of bilingualism and supplementing this idea with actions results in these children performing well on both English and Spanish language tasks.

Parent's motivational factor, as identified by Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) is one of the most important factors in a child's success. Parents are their children's motivators. If a parent is not fully invested in the success of a child, then that child is less likely to perform. Parents need to be available and ready to help their children both in their daily interactions and by providing them with additional resources. Conversely, children need to be pushed to succeed. This idea crosses all ethnic and racial boundaries. Those children who are not provided with the support they need perform poorly on all tasks, regardless of the language of the task or the skill being measured. Children perform well on those tasks they are motivated to learn. Children whose parents believe English is essential to survive in this country push their children to learn English. Children whose parents believe bilingualism is an asset and provide children with the resources to become bilingual perform well on tasks in both languages.

Parental education and immigration status play a large role in the motivation parents provide their children to succeed. The families in this study have varying histories, but the most important factor in their child's ability is the level and goal of their motivation. Regardless of the child's placement into

one of the four categories previously mentioned, the commonality lies in the parent's goals for that child. While motivation transcends boundaries, it is important to understand the reasoning behind the parent's likeliness to motivate. This factor is unique for each parent and will provide a better understanding of the family dynamics and children's performance level in both English and Spanish.

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