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Hispanic Families as Facilitators of Their Children's Literacy Development

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Abstract: Hispanic families provide children with literacy-rich environments, experiences, and interactions. Studies were reviewed to identify the Hispanic families' literacy practices, which were influenced by the families' educational levels, language, beliefs, and cultural practices. Family members can reinforce the children's literacy learning when they are presented with literacy experiences in a myriad of settings and contexts. The Hispanic family's support, school environments, school challenges, literacy intervention programs, and educational implications are discussed.

Resumen: Familias hispanas proveen medios ambientes ricos en letras, experiencias e interacciones. Aquí se revisan estudios que identifican prácticas literarias de familias hispanas, las cuales están influenciadas por el nivel educacional de las familias, lenguaje, creencias, y prácticas culturales. Estos demuestran que miembros familiares pueden reforzar el aprendizaje literario de los niños cuando se les presenta con experiencias literarias en contextos y medios variados. Se discute el apoyo hispano familiar, ambiente escolar, retos escolares, programas de intervención literaria y las implicaciones educacionales.

Keywords: *family literacy; emergent literacy; parents*

For more than four decades, literacy researchers have tried to determine which home factors contribute to young Hispanic children's literacy development. Hispanic children have often been classified as at risk because of their difficulty in reaching language proficiency. Schools have used traditional language and literacy strategies that have caused these children to fail and continue to be considered at risk throughout their school years (Saracho & Spodek, 2002). In confronting this challenge, researchers and educators are designing literacy development approaches that are responsive to the realities of the Hispanic children and their families. The majority of the research on Hispanic children has focused on the children's home and culture. Durkin (1966), for example, studied children's home experiences to determine the factors that promote their literacy acquisition. She found that reading to children motivated their interest in reading. She also found that children who learned to read before first grade were the ones who were read to by siblings, parents, or another caring adult.

In 1998 Congress recognized the value of families reading to children at home by passing the following two legislations:

The Reading Excellence Act guarantees that all children are able to read well and independently by the end of third grade.

The Workforce Investment Act substitutes the National Adult Literacy Act of 1991 by providing family literacy, adult basic education, and ESL programs.

The support from the 1998 legislation included funding family literacy programs. This funding provided an incentive for researchers to examine the importance of these programs. Thus *family literacy* became an innovative and widely used term in literacy.

The purpose of this review is to describe (a) the support that Hispanic families use to build their Spanish-speaking children's personal and academic success; (b) Hispanic families' literacy practices that are influenced by their language, beliefs, cultural practices, and educational level; and (c) the development of Hispanic family-school partnerships by overcoming school challenges and providing family literacy intervention programs.

Hispanic Family Support

Many Hispanic learners depend on the support of significant others to build their personal and academic success. Studies indicated that supportive relationships—including positive encouragement from parents—contributed to school achievement (Prelow & Loukas, 2003). This support becomes critical for Hispanic immigrant children who are challenged by a new country, a new language, and a new culture (Chavkin & Feyl-Gonzalez, 2000; Sands & Plunkett, 2005). These children need to experience opportunities to develop and practice language and reading skills both in the classroom and in other contexts, including the home environment. Hispanic parents can participate in their children's education and provide them with several kinds of support within the family. They can teach their children about literacy with their real lives and the real world (Quezada, Díaz, & Sánchez, 2003).

Research suggests that the most critical element in the Hispanic children's educational success has been the family's involvement in school and nonschool learning (Bernal et al., 2000). The support of the family has been a foundation upon which to build personal and academic success (Prelow & Loukas, 2003), especially for Hispanic children who encounter a different language and culture (Chavkin & Feyl-Gonzalez, 2000; Sands & Plunkett, 2005) in the school. The Hispanic families' involvement can increase the children's academic and language achievement (Quezada et al., 2003).

As the Hispanic population has increased in both size and diversity, researchers have identified those assets in families that promote their children's positive development (Rodríguez & Morrobel, 2004; Sands & Plunkett, 2005). Steidel and Contreras

(2003) showed that relatively unacculturated and predominantly Hispanic families had the following elements:

- *Familial Support*. Family members support immediate and extended family members in times of need and in everyday life.
- *Familial Interconnectedness*. Family members are both physically and emotionally close to each other, including those relatives who spend and value their time together.
- *Familial Honor*. Family members assume responsibility to protect the family name and defend any attacks against the family's integrity.
- *Subjugation of Self for Family*. Family members are submissive to and respect the family's rules.

Steidel and Contreras (2003) used the term *familism* to describe this support. This term reflects a core value of the Hispanic culture (Vega, 1990; Zinn, 1982), which recently received some research attention because of its foreseeable consequences especially among members of this diverse cultural group. Familism is a multidimensional construct consisting of at least three dimensions: structural, behavioral, and attitudinal. In the structural dimension, the presence or absence of the nuclear and extended family members define the spatial and social boundaries. This is measured by the number of adult relatives who live within driving distance of the family member's home. The behavioral dimension of familism reflects those behaviors associated with the feelings and attitudes about the family, such as calling family members on the telephone or visiting them (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). Attitudinal familism is a cultural value related to the individuals' strong identification and attachment to their nuclear and extended families as well as the individuals' strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among family members (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002). Burgess, Locke, and Thomes (1963) defined *attitudinal familism* as

- 1) the feeling on the part of all members that they belong pre-eminently to the family group and that all other persons are outsiders; 2) complete integration of individual activities for the achievement of family objectives; 3) the assumption that land, money, and other material goods are family property, involving the obligation to support individual members and give them assistance when they are in need; 4) willingness of all members to rally to the support of a member if attacked by outsiders; and 5) concern for the perpetuation of the family as evidenced by helping adult offspring in beginning and continuing an economic activity in line with family expectations and in setting up a new household. (pp. 35-36)

The sociological literature defined familism, family solidarity, family integration, or intergenerational solidarity as the normative commitment of family members to the family and to family relationships. Family support has been a critical factor in children's personal and academic success (Prelow & Loukas, 2003). Children's educational

success is influenced when their families support and participate in their school and nonschool learning (Bernal et al., 2000), especially in their literacy learning.

Hispanic Families' Literacy Practices

Community and family environments can contribute to children's literacy development, providing them with literacy experiences (e.g., books, storytelling print materials) in various settings and contexts. Studies have provided evidence that young children learn to read at home when they experience literacy-rich environments, experiences, and interactions. Children need to be provided in their homes with opportunities to access books that foster their perception of competence with print (Barnes, Snow, Hemphill, Chandler, & Goodman, 2000). A family's literacy practices are (a) found in the home environment; (b) related to the family's language, beliefs, and cultural practices; and (c) influenced by the family's educational level.

Home Environment

Literacy experiences provided to children differ based on the context in which the experiences are offered. For example, Delgado-Gaitán (1994) found a difference between the home and school literacy experiences that Hispanic children have. Auerbach's (1989) review of the research indicated that even the home environments of poor, undereducated, English language-learning children were rich with reading and writing practices and literacy tools and materials. Although great diversity in Hispanic familial literacy practices has been reported, there is little information on how early literacy activities are determined across Hispanic families. Studies of parents' involvement in their children's early literacy development have indicated that early reading experiences can better prepare children for formal literacy instruction and establish a foundation for later reading success (Ordoñez-Jasis & Ortiz, 2006; Ortiz, 2004; Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005). Other researchers (e.g., McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998; Ordoñez-Jasis & Ortiz, 2006; Ortiz, 2004; Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005) found that nonmainstream parents supported their children's reading and writing development through everyday situations and community interactions that families experience on a daily basis. Such nontraditional interactions and events have the potential to improve the children's education and could provide the foundation for developing culturally enriched literacy programs (Nieto, 2002).

Researchers (Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992; Mulhern, 1994) have examined literacy activities in Hispanic family environments. They found that kindergarten and first-grade children initiated most of the home literacy activities. They reported that children read alone, with their mothers, and with siblings at home. Because almost half of the literacy activities at home involved school materials, the school was responsible for the literacy interactions of Hispanic kindergartners at

home (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991). Delgado-Gaitán (1990) reported that Hispanic children's homework was the most common printed text and literacy practice among the working class of Mexican-immigrant families.

Language, Beliefs, and Cultural Practices

Researchers (e.g., Auerbach, 1995; Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Moll, 1992; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Saracho, 2003) have extensively documented that culturally and linguistically diverse families value literacy and believe that it is the single most powerful hope for their children's future success. Ada (1988, 2003) and Huerta-Macías (1995) identified stories (e.g., folktales, fables), language, and themes (e.g., herbal medicines) that reflected the Mexican American families' language, beliefs, culture, and literacy practices.

Hispanic families possess a great diversity in their familial literacy practices. Delgado-Gaitán (1994) examined the early reading practices of immigrant families from México and found that all parents valued literacy skills for their children. These families had their own personal descriptions of good and bad readers. Most of these families read to their early elementary-age children on a regular basis. Hofferth (2003) found that cultural factors provided the differences between White and Hispanic families. Gillanders and Jiménez (2004) examined the home environments of immigrant Mexican kindergartners who displayed high levels of emergent literacy in comparison to their peers. In considering the literacy beliefs and practices of four of these families, they found a relationship between the role of active parental support and the literacy practices at home. As they viewed these results, they saw Hispanic families as promoters of positive effects of bilingualism and literacy learning. They also found that the school's use of Spanish supported the families' beliefs about their active support of their children's literacy learning and subsequent literacy practices.

The use of print in the community and family environments can support the children's literacy practices. Mexican American families reported that text and print embedded in and around their neighborhood (e.g., street signs, billboards, and logos) motivated young children to ask their parents various literacy-related questions (Ortiz, 1994). Other studies indicated that Hispanic families provided their children with a range of literacy experiences such as literacy for entertainment, daily living, general information, religion, and others beyond practices involving books or schooling *per se* (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Goldenberg, 1984, 1987; Ortiz, 1994).

Family literacy should be based on the interests and needs of the family (Saracho, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). Family literacy should be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of each family and its members. This means that the family's culture that is integrated in the structure of everyday life should be viewed as an educational resource. The myriad of ways parents participate in the literary lives of their children should provide the basis for the development of comprehensive and culturally relevant family-literacy

initiatives (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005). Hispanic parents, like many other parents in American society, strongly believe in education as a means to enhance their children's life opportunities although the way they give voice to that belief may vary based on the families' educational level.

Educational Level

Research on the Hispanic families' early literacy practices indicates that families provide guidance, participation, and concern in relation to their children's literacy development (Ortiz, 2004). Reese and associates (Reese, Gallimore, Balzano, & Goldenberg, 1995; Reese, Goldenberg, Loucky, & Gallimore, 1989) found that immigrant Central and South American families assist in and contribute to their children's literacy development at a level that is consistent with the parents' scholastic achievement. Reese (1992) reported historical family literacy practices in Mexican households. The educational level of the family (including parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles) had an important impact on the children's reading achievement. Laosa (1982) examined the relationship between parents' schooling and behavior toward their children and found that the family's educational level contributed to their knowledge and occupation. Moll, Velez-Ibañez, and Greenberg (1990) surveyed Hispanic households to document the origin, use, and distribution of knowledge and literacy skills through the families' "funds of knowledge." They showed that the children's success in learning to read was influenced by their parents' occupations or other areas of interest, which reflected the literacy skills that the families used on a daily basis.

Developing Family-School Partnerships

The research reviewed above strongly suggests that Hispanic families' participation in their children's literacy experiences can facilitate their literacy learning, academic achievement, and future reading success. Most Hispanic families daily engage in literacy experiences without thinking twice about it. When families share print and text with their children, their members make the transition from one of acquiring knowledge at a personal level to one of becoming empowered resources and meaning makers in their children's lives. The school needs to build on that sense of empowerment by helping parents become equal partners in the children's education and help Hispanic families avoid common challenges that they may encounter in the school.

Challenges

Families can help increase Hispanic children's achievement scores but several challenges need to be overcome to attract the families' participation in the children's

education. Some Hispanic families may not encounter challenges, but many families do. For example, Quezada et al. (2003) identified the following challenges that Hispanic families typically encounter within school systems:

1. *Lacking the ability to understand English.* Parents assumed that no one in the school would listen to them, because they were unable to communicate in English.
2. *Fearing participation in the school.* Becoming a teaching partner in the school was a tradition that was missing from the Hispanic culture. Hispanic parents (a) had a high regard for educators, (b) treated educators as professionals, and (c) believed that their intervention would be counterproductive.
3. *Being uninformed about the school system.* Parents who were new to the United States or who had limited experiences with the school system were unaware that they had a right to participate in their children's education.
4. *Having limited education.* Parents with limited education believed that they did not have the level of education to participate in the schools. They felt inadequate to engage in academic discussions because they believed they did not have the knowledge to understand or use educational terms.
5. *Having multiple obligations.* Parents frequently worked two jobs, which might have interfered with their attendance at school meetings. Their work might have been scheduled at the same time as the school meetings. In addition, if parents had jobs that were highly physically demanding, they might have been too tired to attend the school meeting or event.
6. *Having had adverse school experiences.* Parents may have had negative experiences with the schools, which may have diminished their willingness to participate in school functions.
7. *Experiencing school staff's negative or patronizing attitudes.* Parents avoided visiting the school when they felt that the school staff treated them as inferior.
8. *Having a need for transportation and childcare.* Parents may have needed transportation or childcare assistance to attend meetings.

Schools need to identify the challenges for each family and help families overcome these challenges. Schools can use several strategies to overcome challenges that may arise. Schools need to reach out to these parents. Huerta-Macías, González, and Tinajero (1998) believed that Hispanic families respond to more personal strategies that make them feel comfortable, such as invitations to informal *café y pan dulce* (coffee and sweet bread) gatherings before school, lunch invitations in the school cafeteria where families eat with the teacher and students, after-school classroom demonstrations by the students, telephone calls, home visits, after-school conversations when the parents pick up their children, and informal school-wide *charlas* (talks) on topics selected by the parents. In addition, Quezada et al. (2003) suggested the following:

- Offer parents flexible schedules. Ask for their input.
- Offer transportation to the school site and childcare.

- Conduct home visits to invite parents to school.
- Ask parents for input regarding workshops or training.
- Send school information home in English and Spanish.
- Conduct meetings in English and Spanish if needed.
- View parents as contributors and collaborators.
- Plan meetings as social events outside of school.
- Provide hands-on training
- Make parents feel welcome. (p. 33)

The potential and promise of active parental involvement in children's literacy learning requires that educators use the wealth of the Hispanic home-based knowledge in their school-based practices to establish a strong foundation that can lead to the Hispanic children's school success (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005). Families need to experience learning environments that support their culturally and linguistically diverse needs (U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005).

Family members can be both teachers and role models in reading. The U.S. Department of Education (2000) offered the following recommendations to help families develop their young children's literacy development:

1. Provide them with rich language experiences throughout the day beginning when they are infants. These experiences include talking with them frequently, naming things, telling stories, singing songs, reciting nursery rhymes or poems, and describing the world around them.
2. Read aloud to them daily for 30 minutes.
3. Maintain reading materials visibly and available throughout the home.
4. Assign a special place at home for reading and writing activities and make available many good books and writing materials.
5. Visiting the public library often.
6. Have their vision and hearing tested early and annually.
7. Restrict the time children watch television and encourage educational television programs or videos that lend themselves to discussion.
8. Request that childcare providers spend time talking with and reading to children, take children to the library, and assign a special children's reading area. (Saracho, 2002b, p. 165)

Researchers and educators need to (a) identify the Hispanic family's strengths; (b) fully recognize, integrate, and use the wealth of information, skills, and knowledge that are possessed by these families in the area of literacy; and (c) be aware of families' strengths and abilities in these areas (Ordoñez-Jasis, 2003; Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 2004; Ordoñez-Jasis & Ortiz, 2006). They can use this information to develop intervention programs that will help address any challenges.

Literacy Intervention Programs

Research indicates that the challenges that can appear in developing the family-school partnerships can be overcome and that children can be helped to succeed through early intervention in the child-development process in the home and in the early education years. An early intervention that has been identified was parental involvement in the schools to support the children's educational achievement and success. Family literacy programs, one such intervention, have been developed to help Hispanic families learn strategies and activities that foster their young children's literacy development (Saracho, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). To respond to the urgent need to increase the Hispanic children's reading achievement, Scholastic, the National Council of La Raza, and the Verizon Foundation (2005) launched *Lee y Serás* (Read and You Will Be), a groundbreaking Hispanic early literacy initiative that engages parents and communities in their children's literacy development.

Family literacy programs can raise the awareness of Hispanic parents, children, and teachers regarding the importance of the role families can assume in their children's literacy development. Such programs can provide teachers with strategies for promoting home literacy in the families of Hispanic children by focusing on the families' language and culture. Families can contribute to their children's acquisition of literacy. Tett (2000) and Stainthorp and Hughes (2000) showed that there was an extensive level of literacy evident in their homes. Families engaged in literacy practices related to what they already know (Saracho, 2001, 2003; Tett, 2000), which includes their language, beliefs, and cultural practices. Studies have indicated that specific beliefs and practices in families were essential in promoting literacy learning (Gregory, 2001; Robertson, 2002; Saracho, 2000, 2001).

Saracho (2000, 2001) has conducted several studies in which the children's family environment was used to focus on the families' specific beliefs and practices to support successful attainment of different forms of literacy that are valued by the schools. She generated alternative explanations and extended previous theories of academic success or failure in Hispanic children. She demonstrated that family literacy programs can assist Hispanic families in acquiring literacy practices that can contribute to their children's literacy development (Saracho, 2002a, 2002b).

Results from studies on family literacy must be seriously considered, especially those strategies that help families provide literacy instruction. It is essential that families learn successful strategies that promote their children's literacy development. Ortiz and Ordoñez-Jasis (2005) provided the following recommendations to establish family literacy programs and initiatives that are effective and comprehensive:

- Consider the present beliefs and dispositions toward the parent involvement at all levels (e.g., district, school, classroom). Teachers need to reflect on their attitudes,

practices, and assumptions concerning parent involvement. Then they need to address their strengths, needs, and challenges on parent involvement (Ada, Campoy, & Zubizarreta, 2001).

- Acquire introductory or background information from both parents. Family surveys, individual interviews, focal groups, and home observations can provide valuable information about specific family situations and the parents' perceptions and expectations on the purposes of literacy in their lives.
- Include diversity in the reading materials. Multicultural literature that is relevant to Hispanic families can be of interest to the parents. Ada's (2003) historical analysis of children's books for children suggested that literature books be written by Hispanic authors and have themes that are authentically related to the Hispanic families.
- Use literacy to give parents empowerment. Schools can assume the responsibility for establishing parent networks wherein they participate in decision making to improve the children's school (Jasis, 2000).
- Include those parents with limiting reading and writing skills. Parents who are not able to read or write fluently in both their primary language and English can still assume a critical role in their children's literacy learning. Both literate and nonliterate parents should be encouraged to participate in their children's literacy experiences.
- Consider parents with specific needs. Several techniques should be used to involve all parents. Approaches may include sending home translated invitations for special events and using a translator for parent workshops and conferences.
- Create a strong community of learners. Literacy activities need to be related to the home and community environments. For example, teachers need to use the families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1990), interests, ethnicity, and cultural perspectives.

Researchers who develop family literacy programs need to focus on an extension of the family itself instead of an extension of the school. Studies indicate that family literacy programs can assist educators in becoming more sensitive to families and teaching them ways to promote their children's literacy development in their own unique teaching style, language, and culture. Families need to be consulted in the decisions about the process of the program. It is also important that the families' communicated needs guide the development, implementation, and instruction of their literacy program. The cooperation of the families can increase the retention rates in the family literacy program (Saracho & Spodek, 2002).

Summary

Hispanic families can contribute to their children's literacy experiences that can provide the basis for formal reading instruction. Many Hispanic families spontaneously engage in literacy experiences in their daily lives. Families who provide children with literacy experiences that relate to their environments help them to understand their world. The potential and promise of parents' active involvement in

their children's literacy learning requires that educators use the wealth of the Hispanic home-based knowledge in their school-based practices to establish a strong foundation that can lead to the Hispanic children's school success (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005), including developing collaborative programs.

School and community collaborative programs need to use the Hispanic families' cultural values to (a) focus on personal contact, (b) promote communication, (c) provide a warm and positive environment, and (d) adapt to the families' needs to encourage their participation (Quezada et al., 2003). According to Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991), Hispanic children will learn better when their teachers integrate their home and community values. Auerbach (1989) remarked on the importance of this relationship:

Literacy is meaningful to students to the extent that it relates to daily realities. . . . The teachers' role is to connect what happens inside the classroom to what happens outside so that literacy can become a meaningful tool for addressing the issues in students' lives. (p. 166)

Families can become active participants in children's early literacy progress when teachers relate and expand the wealth of home-based knowledge to school-based practices to create a basis for the children's school success.

Young English-language learners need to be presented with a variety of learning experiences for them to develop and practice language and reading skills. Young children's experiences with language and reading at home have been found to have an impact on their success or failure in learning to read. English-language learners generally have experienced 40,000 hours of their home language and 3,000 hours of English after 6 years of schooling (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). Children can develop literacy skills in a family environment using their own language and culture.

Intervention approaches can be provided to help families learn strategies to promote their children's literacy development (Saracho, 2002a, 2002b). These interventions need to emphasize elements that promote (a) the quality of family-child interactions, (b) the quality of the family environment (Saracho, 2002a, 2002b), (c) the development of desirable values, and (d) the development of the families' strengths rather than their deficits (Delgado-Gaitán, 1990, 1994). These interventions should use objects and materials from the community and families' home environment that reflect the children's language, interests, and emerging skills; literacy strategies that foster the children's communication; and the families' understanding of new information (Saracho, 2002a, 2002b).

Researchers who develop family literacy programs should focus on an extension of the family itself instead of an extension of the school. Studies indicated that family literacy programs assist educators in becoming more sensitive to families and teach them ways to promote their children's literacy development in their own unique teaching style, language, and culture. Families need to be consulted in the

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