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From Bilingual to Biliteracy: Learning from Families

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Abstract

This study examined the home literacy practices of bilingual families. We were specifically interested in the literacy practices families developed to answer the challenge of biliteracy. Through the home visits and supplying high quality bilingual books, we listened, observed, and gained a deeper understanding of the children and their families which allowed us and educators reading this piece to make connections between children’s home literacy practices and literacy practices in the classroom. After discussing the use of bilingual books, the following four themes emerged from the data: families negotiating biliteracy using bilingual books, the role of Spanish, siblings and literacy learning, families negotiating resources for literacy and interacting with schools.

Keywords: Multilingual families, Bilingual books, Home visits

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Language development and literacy learning are inexorably linked. For young children, informal literacy emerges from constant interactions with language and literacy practices from birth through early childhood. These interactions lead to a series of capabilities that pave the way for informal literacy learning including oral language, phonemic awareness, concepts of print, and alphabet knowledge. Young children growing in multilingual families are developing capacity in two or more languages creating a series of challenges for parents and educators who try to balance each language while attempting to maximize children's educational success in a predominantly monolingual school context. Knowledge is needed for young children to bridge the complex linguistic landscape linking home and community experiences to new learning in educational settings.

In a 2017 research study, we found that when Latinx children initiated literacy through pretending to read and scribbling they had improved phonological processing ability (Trainin et al., 2017). While our results were correlational, past research has identified potential causal links. Researchers have repeatedly shown that phonological processes are a prerequisite for literacy acquisition (Bishop & League, 2006) because they help with children's ability to identify graphemes and letter-sound correspondence. Tabors, Pérez, & López's (2003) exploration of early bilingual literacy development found that phonological awareness and early literacy skills were dynamic, bidirectional, and the most transferable between Spanish and English for Spanish-speaking children from preschool through 2nd grade. In our study, we wanted to dig deeper into the ways that Latinx families initiate literacy with bilingual books so we can better support teachers in designing instruction that capitalizes on existing funds of knowledge.

Literature Review

Young children learn about language and literacy through their interactions with caregivers, peers, and community members, through the process of guided participation (Petty, 2009; Rogoff, 1993). In guided participation, children learn valued cultural activities saturated with linguistic and literacy experiences. These cultural activities may be part of the child's daily routines, religious services, life cycle events,

and extended family gatherings. Children are constantly interpreting what is happening in their world based on these primary socializations (Barton et al., 2000).

Adults can foster children's language and literacy growth through daily routines, conversations, and guided participation in reading. Direct literacy learning can be done through shared storybook reading, which involves caregivers and children reading a book together, as a way for children to acquire important oral language and emergent literacy skills (Grolig, 2020; Roberts, 2008). Language abilities of United States preschoolers have been found to be correlated with the frequency of shared reading of picture books (Hoff, 2006; van Steensel, 2006). The value of parents and caregivers reading to young children has been recognized and strongly supported by research. Children who are read to from an early age display more interest in reading than children who lack this experience (Moll & Bus, 2011).

Parent-child shared book reading can be a key component to the development of young children's language and literacy skills (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2011; Lane & Wright, 2007). Through storybook reading, emergent literacy skills (oral language, early reading/writing, print knowledge, and phonological awareness) emerge through young children's experiences with the written language in their world over time (e.g., Martini and Sénéchal, 2012). Book reading provides a critical opportunity to involve children and parents in a cognitively demanding quality talk (Pinkham & Neuman, 2012). Research has also suggested that young children's talk and thinking about the book are the keys to literacy growth as they build the foundation for future reading proficiency (Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, & Kurland, 1995). Thus, engaging the child in active participation in reading aloud together with quality talk has the potential in enhancing the quality of reading even with emerging bilingual children.

The early years are a critical window for children acquiring rich language and emerging literacy skills (McTavish, 2007; Moats, 2000). In a seminal research study conducted by Goldenberg et al. (1992), it was found that immigrant Latino families tended to favor discrete skills such as teaching letter naming and letter/sound correspondence as they taught literacy to their children. This type of children's literacy development called "inside-out" skills (e.g., print knowledge, phonological awareness) is needed as children move from emergent to

formal literacy (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014). However, when children interact with language in real-life experiences including child-care and home settings, they build a foundation of insights about language that supports learning to read (Logan et al., 2019). When parents read to children at home, the children learn “outside-in skills” which support the development of receptive and expressive oral language (Logan et al., 2019). These skills are heavily influenced by the home and language experiences of children.

Bilingual Books

Early experiences with children’s books have shown to have a positive impact on the language and literacy development of English-speaking children (Lefebvre, Trudeau, & Sutton, 2011; Farrant & Zubrick, 2012). While there is not as much research on the impact of book reading on multilingual children, there is evidence that book reading facilitates literacy development among emerging bilingual families (Kalia, 2007). Bilingual books encourage second language acquisition, promote different cultures, and maintain the native language. Bilingual books provide sentences in both language which readers can compare and learn more about the sentence structures. Rudin (1996) defines bilingual literature as two languages together appearing with equal or similar weight, extent, and format.

Even when book-rich classrooms are readily available to students at school, books may not be available at home (Koskinen et al., 2000). Access to quality and quantity of books impacts opportunities for children to read beyond the classroom walls. Koskinen and colleagues (2000) investigated whether increasing access to books (in the classroom and at home) was a sufficient supplement to the literacy instruction and achievement of linguistically diverse students and native English-speaking students. They found that the availability of books was a significant factor in students’ literacy achievement and reading interest, particularly for linguistically diverse students.

In 1990, Rudine Sims Bishop wrote “books are mirrors reflecting our own lives at us” (p. xi). However, according to US Statistics in 2018, there were more character books featuring animals and other non-human characters (27%) than all types of visible minorities combined (23%) and in half of all children’s books’ the protagonist was

white. Bilingual books are needed because they represent diversity and elevate multiple cultures while bridging languages. They encourage parents to continue using their native language knowing it will benefit, rather than detract, from learning English.

Home Visits as Research and Practice

Home visits provide opportunities for insights into the lives, practices, interests, and activities of families (Wessels, 2014). While research focused on the nature and content of home visiting remains sparse, a recent meta-analysis found that effect sizes for numerous program outcomes varied depending on program structure and approach (Filene, 2012). Logan and Feiler (2006) found that home visits were beneficial to parents of young children. In their study, home visits were associated with greater confidence in parents' interactions with children's educational programs. Children who receive home visits were found to have greater engagement in literacy activities (Logan & Feiler, 2006).

Parents provide a wealth of family traditions, knowledge, and experiences for their children. Kyle and colleagues (2005) studied how teachers visited children's homes to become familiar with families "funds of knowledge" (Moje et al., 2004). Moje and colleagues (2004) defined funds of knowledge as untapped cultural experiences of families. The idea of funds of knowledge provides an effective way of listening to parents. In this study, we echo the proposition of Moll and colleagues (2004) "Qualitative research offers a range of methodological alternatives that can fathom the array of cultural and intellectual resources available to students and teachers within these households." (p. 132). In this research study, we were specifically interested in the literacy practices families developed to answer the challenge of biliteracy. We argue that inverting the deficit view of immigrant bilingual families by examining the richness of home literacy practices is critical to develop meaningful language and literacy education. Through the home visits and supplying high quality bilingual books, we listened, observed, and gained a deeper understanding of the children and their families which allowed us and educators reading this piece to make connections between the children's home literacy practices to the literacy practices in the classroom.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study included seven mothers and their 19 children (11 girls and 8 boys) who were enrolled at Harper Elementary (pseudonym), first language was Spanish, and all were Mexican American. Three of the girls and three of the boys were in preschool. Four of the girls and three of the boys were in kindergarten. Two girls were in First Grade. One girl and two boys were in Second Grade. Two boys were in Third Grade and one girl was in Fourth Grade. Each family was part of a multilingual family literacy project which was conducted in a voluntary after-school program. Harper Elementary was in a high-poverty neighborhood in a mid-western city. The school had 30% English learners, 87% received Free or Reduced Lunch, and 81.4% of students were from minoritized backgrounds.

The mothers were between 26 and 37 years old. Two of the mothers were enrolled in English classes while one mother was on the waiting list for such classes. Two of the mothers had only a few years of formal education. Five of the mothers have had several years of education in their home countries while the other five had some secondary education. Four of the mothers worked outside of the home. The participating families came from various parts of Mexico (both rural and urban settings), and most of the families (6 out of 7) have lived for extended periods in various parts of the United States. All the families were in contact with all immediate family members living in the United States.

The children (preschool through early elementary grades) were acquiring Spanish as their first language at home and community while simultaneously being introduced to English in the school setting. The mothers indicated that their children spoke Spanish to them, but most children spoke English with their siblings. All children were typically developing and had age-appropriate expressive and receptive language skills as reported by parents and teachers.

Data Sources

Data were collected over a four-month period and included parent/child observations in the home setting, interviews with mothers, and field notes.

Participant Observations During Home Visits

The home visits were an extension of a voluntary family literacy project. The participants of the family literacy project signed up for times for us to visit them in their home environments at a time that worked best for them. The first and third author visited each family for 60–90 min three times during the research study. The third author was bilingual and lead the interviews. Each interview lasted about 20–30 min, and observations lasted about 40–60 min depending on the number of family members. On each of the visits, we observed the physical setting and informal interactions between parents and children reading bilingual books. More specifically, we observed participants' language and literacy practices when engaging with the books. The initial home visit involved a brief interview with each mother conducted by the first and third authors. The second home visit and interviews were conducted two weeks after the initial interview and the final home visit and interview was conducted two weeks later. During each home visit, we gave the participants bilingual (Spanish/English) books to help build their home libraries and encouraged reading amongst the families. The five bilingual books were given according to the interests and ages of the children. There was a wide range of fiction and non-fiction bilingual books for the parents to select from for their children (Table 1).

To guard against the potential biases of participatory observations we used triangulation of data from multiple sources. Coding was done by both researchers who were onsite and those who were not. As researchers, we weighed the potential bias of visiting participants home vs. the ability to observe their reading behaviors in vivo and concluded much like Creswell and Poth (2018) that if the researchers spend a significant amount of time and practice respect and reciprocity, the benefit to the authenticity outweighs the potential costs.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spanish, led by the third author, and were an average of 20–30 min in length. Through semi-structured interviews, we gained information about specific family literacy practices, as well as parental perceptions and

Table 1 Sampling of bilingual books used throughout the home visits

 Fiction

Braids (Trencitas) by Kathleen Centreras

Words Are Not for Hurting (Las palabras no son para lastimar)
by Elizabeth Verdick

The Dog Who Loved Tortillas (La perrita quele encantaban las tortillas) by Benjamin Alire Saenz and Geronimo Garcia

Bear in a Square (Oso enun cuadrado) by Stella Blackstone

Say it with Skippy Jones (Diga con Skippyjon Jones) by Judy Schachner

Goodnight Moon (Buenas noches, Luna) by Margaret Wise Brown

Non-Fiction

Hello Ocean (Hola Mar) by Pam Munoz Ryan

The Weather (El tiempo) by Gladys Rosa Mendoza

Polar Bears in Danger (Animales polares en peligro) by Melvin Berger

Solar System (Coleccion el sistema solar) by Melvin & Gilda Berger

Note: We used a large selection of books with hundreds of titles; families chose their books each session.

the use of bilingual books in their daily lives. The first interview was a structured interview designed to gain background information about the family (see Appendix A). The follow-up interviews explored family perceptions and experiences with the bilingual books and other literacy practices. These interviews allowed us to ask the parents specific questions that were critical in interpreting the observations and field notes taken during the previous home visits. The third author transcribed the audio-recorded interviews from Spanish to English.

Field Notes

After each home visit, the researchers kept notes about the interactions with parents and children to try and capture elements that

were not easily captured by interviews including emotions and body language (Merriam, 1998). The detailed interaction moments during the observations helped the authors to picture the participating families' daily lives through coherent accounts (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). The field notes included comments specific to individual experiences and questions or clarifications to ask during the next home visit or interview. The field notes were used primarily for triangulation.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was guided by the principles of thematic analysis in ethnographic research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) including reading the data for a sense of the whole, documenting reflections in memos, coding the data, and developing themes and patterns from the data and codes (Creswell, 2008). This analytic process was iterative and simultaneous with data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The memos helped think through possible meanings of the data, find relationships between the topics, refine coding, create selective codes, and ultimately, build an understanding of the data.

Once the interviews were transcribed, the first and second author applied initial codes to the data. Each discrete meaning unit was broken out of the raw data and given a code. In the beginning, coding was done by open coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but once the data began to yield deeper information, we started to look at the coding analytically for categories, or themes of information (Morse & Richards, 2002) that allowed for comparison. As the analysis progressed, the first and second authors employed the analytic strategy of constant-comparative analysis between codes and reflective memos which helped identify emerging hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1976). We kept coming back to the memos that we wrote throughout the data analysis. The memos helped us think through possible meanings of data, find relationships between the codes, and build an understanding of the data. This process of examining the data, topics, and emergent categories lead to the current themes: families negotiating biliteracy using bilingual books; role of Spanish: home, faith, family, and culture; siblings and literacy learning; families negotiating resources for literacy and interacting with schools.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, we used several validation strategies: triangulating findings across multiple sources of data (observations, interviews, and field notes), establishing a chain of evidence, and sharing initial findings with participating parents as a form of member checking (Patton, 2002). We were able to member-check with three of the parent participants who concurred with our interpretations.

Our Roles as a Researchers

We acknowledge our roles as researchers. We are a team consisting of one European American, a visiting educator from Spain, and an immigrant academic identifying as White. We were outsiders in the homes of our hosts although we had previous contacts with the families that were part of a family literacy program, we led at the school. We positioned ourselves as learners in relation to the families and assumed the families had considerably more knowledge about biliteracy in their lives than we did. From the outset of the study, we stated to participants that the purpose of our interviews was to learn about their home literacy practices. Although we identified ourselves as learners and made efforts to connect personally with the participants and see the data from their point of view (Johnson & Cowles, 2009), we were aware of how our cultural background and ethnicity impacted the way data were represented and interpreted in this study. To counteract some of the biases, we used a thematic analysis approach based on ethnographic participant observations that allowed us to avoid using a-priori western originated theories and instead create understanding based on the data shared with us. All the interviews were recorded and conducted in Spanish which were later translated, and member checked. We wanted to honor the families' native language, so we included both the initial Spanish response along with the English translation.

Results

Analysis of the data yielded a complex series of ideas about navigating multiple languages, biliteracy, and culture in the home of the families. It was mothers' input that put culture at the center of the discussion

about language and literacy as the families navigated being bilingual and bicultural. Most of the families negotiated the duality being very aware of their belonging to both US and Mexico. For example, Esmeralda shared:

“Porque a veces hay niños que no han estado nunca y cuando han ido aunque con los papás no hablaban español llegan a México y si saben hablar español. Lo que a veces no lo usan y uno se preocupa y piensa que no van a saber. [We have already told them that they have to speak Spanish well because we don’t want to go to Mexico one day and find out that they cannot speak it well.]

After discussing the use of bilingual books, the following themes emerged from the data: families negotiating biliteracy using bilingual books, the role of Spanish, siblings and literacy learning, families negotiating resources for literacy; and interacting with schools.

Families Negotiating Biliteracy Using Bilingual Books

Six of the seven mothers commented on the use of bilingual books while negotiating biliteracy in the home. One mother commented that “Le traje algunas cosas bilingües que está la misma cosa escrita en inglés y en español” [(My kids) now only read the short stories in Spanish and English and then compares them]. Even at a young age, the children were learning about how both languages work, comparing the vocabulary and words in English and Spanish. Another mother stated:

“Oh, estaban felices y agarraban uno y agarraban otro y lo agarraban y se ponían a leer y se lo enseñaban a los amiguitos que venían, les enseñaban los libros, que tenían los libros en español y les gustaron mucho. Emmanuel leía en inglés y luego en español para él ya era más fácil entender, le quedaba más claro lo que estaba diciendo” [They were very happy they took one (book) and then another one and they wanted to read. They show the books to their friends. They liked the bilingual ones. They told them that they had Spanish books and they liked them a lot. Emmanuel read in English and in then in Spanish, so it was easier for him to understand what he was reading. It was clearer for him].

The mothers were concerned about language loss because of their children's lack of opportunities and contact with their native language outside of the home. The parents were continually supplying their children with enriching language experiences in Spanish to help prevent language loss and the bilingual books became a favorite tool. Some of the language experiences were reading together, singing songs, re-enacting stories, and encouraging them to engage in literacy with all family's members.

We observed children supporting parents in their learning of the language and reading in English. Many of the mothers commented that their children loved the bilingual books because they realized that they could read in two languages. Some mothers told us they liked the bilingual books because they read the Spanish part to the children and then the children read the English part to them.

“Yo le leo en español y él está poniendo atención y yo le digo al rato léeme en inglés y yo luego ¿Qué pone aquí en español? Y él me dice. Nomás yo le enseño así léelo en inglés y luego vas a leer en español” [I [the mother] read to him in Spanish and he pays attention. Afterward, we tell him to read in English and we ask him: what does it say here in Spanish, and then he tells me the answers. That's the way I teach him, first read it to me in English and then in Spanish].

They told us that reading bilingual books with their children was a two-way collaboration. They helped the children with their Spanish, but they also learned from the children when they were reading English.

Role of Spanish: Home, Faith, Family, and Culture

The role of Spanish was commented by all seven mothers during the interviews. Four of the mothers commented about using Spanish at home, two of the mothers commented on Spanish and faith. All the mothers commented on Spanish use in the family and the cultural community. Three of the mothers reported reading prayers in Spanish, Elena shared:

“Porque sí pueden, bueno lo que es los rezos, porque luego rezamos en la noche y eso lo rezamos en español. Porque los

niños, la niña va a hacer su primera comunión y entonces ya le dieron su hoja de lo que tiene que aprenderse y tiene que aprendérselo en español” [When we pray at night, we do it in Spanish. The girl is going to receive her First Communion and she was given what she has to learn, and she is going to learn it in Spanish]” and more generally “Pero los rezos sí se los saben en español” [They say their prayers in Spanish].

They sang songs, engaged in cooking with their children, and talked about daily experiences in Spanish.

A repeated refrain by the mothers was related to the ability to speak Spanish when traveling to their home country and interacting with extended family.

“Además pueden hablar con los abuelitos en español sino es una lástima que no puedan hablar con la familia.” [They can also talk with the grandparents in Spanish. It is a pity that they are not able to speak with the family.] “Es lo que les digo; Mira van a tener más oportunidades cuando estén grandes. Y si van a México, y se ponen botas y sombrero y agarran un caballo de esos de palito y dicen, ¡Vámonos a México!” [That’s what I say, they will have more opportunities when they are older. In case they go to México they can wear boots and a hat like they do now with a toy horse and say: Let’s go to México!].

Family literacy and language events were often initiated in Spanish. For example, one child wrote about the family in Spanish despite lack of formal schooling in Spanish.

“Sí escribe en inglés y hay a veces que lo quiere escribir en español y dice ¿Cómo se escribe esto? Y lo escribe. A veces lo escribe mal, pero lo escribe, trata de escribir también en español. Y pone, por ejemplo. Hace mucho su papá y él van a tal lado y si hacen esto o lo otro y así.” [Sometimes he [her son] wants to write in Spanish and asks us how to write it and he writes it. Sometimes it is not correct, but he tries to write in Spanish. For example, he writes about his dad and what they did and where they went together.]

In a revealing anecdote one of the mothers shared with joy and pride a literacy event that combined home practices, religion, and fun.

“A veces ellos hacen “puppet” show, ponen todo de almohadas y tapan la entrada y luego se tiran en el piso y salen monitos y dicen quien sabe qué y luego también me cuentan historias de la Biblia. Somos cristianos y en las clases ellos ven mucho y empiezan (imitando voz de niño): Hola que soy este o quién sabe qué. Y luego de pronto se les caen las almohadas.” [Sometimes they like to do puppet shows. They take some pillows and cover the door; they use dolls and tell us stories. They also tell us stories about the Bible. We are Christian and at the lessons they see a lot of things and they make voices saying I’m this person or that person and suddenly when they are doing it all the pillows fall.]

Community was another arena that the mothers emphasized and supported Spanish language and literacy development. “En la iglesia la mayoría habla español. Bueno la mayoría es bilingüe.” [At Church the majority of them speak Spanish; well, the majority of them are bilingual.] The importance of the community in supporting learning Spanish was highlighted “Tienen otra oportunidad de oír otras personas que también hablan español.” [They have the opportunity to hear other people speaking Spanish. If they only hear it at home sometimes it’s difficult for them to learn new words].

Extended family was also an important part.

“Realmente pero tenemos familia en Omaha también. Por parte de mi esposo, hermanas, abuelos, todo. Y pues todos hablan español. Entonces creo que por este lado estamos rodeados de mucha gente que habla español.” [That’s true but we have family in Omaha. They are from my husband side, and we have sisters, grandparents Everybody speaks Spanish. I think that on this side we are surrounded by people that speak Spanish.]

One of the mothers articulated the potential advantage of being bilingual:

“Sí yo digo que en un futuro ellos entran a trabajar y ya necesitan un traductor y si ellos pueden hablar en inglés y

en español.” [Yes, and I think that in the future when they are working if an interpreter is needed, they would be able to speak in English and Spanish.]

Another shared:

“Más fácil porque así sabe los dos idiomas. Ellos dicen que nos les perjudica en casa leer español o puro inglés si ellos dicen que en la escuela van a aprender a leer más rápido.” [It would be easier for them if they speak both languages. They say that it’s not bad for them to read in Spanish or English. They say that they are going to learn to read faster.]

Siblings and Literacy Learning

As we conducted home visits, we found several ways in which the children were engaged in literacy at home. We often found that older siblings initiated reading. Four of the mothers commented on siblings engaged in literacy together. One mother commented:

“Sí y cuando ellos están haciendo la tarea, allí está con ellos haciéndola. Le gusta leer, bueno aún no sabe leer. Escribir o sea cómo dibujar” [When he is doing homework, the little one is with him. He [the younger child] likes to read. Well, he hasn’t learned how to read yet, but he pretends to write].

Another mother stated:

“Sí. Bueno Jennifer lo inventa, esta chiquita y leer no sabe, pero sí sabe muchas letras y si Emmanuel está leyendo ella hace como que está leyendo también y repite todo y sobre todo va con él que le lea un libro. Emmanuel sí. Él va bien en cuanto a la lectura y hay algunos libros que ya se los sabe de corrido porque siempre los ha leído y éste todo en español” [Yes, Jennifer pretends, she is too young and she doesn’t read but she recognizes many letters. When Emmanuel [the older sibling] is reading, she pretends she is also reading and repeats everything he reads. She always wants to be with him when he is reading. Emmanuel reads well. There are some books he knows by heart because he’s always reading them in Spanish].

Older children learned various ways to present information to the younger children, teaching them important literacy knowledge while at the same time likely enhancing and reinforcing their own literacy. This was reinforced by a mother in her comment:

“Sí y le enseña. A ver, Jennifer y le pone la palabra y le dice cómo dice aquí y Jennifer se queda pobre (L) no sé. ¿Cómo dice aquí y yo le traté, pero dice no le ayudes me dice ya sabe? ¿Cómo dice aquí Jennifer? (L) Quiere que ella diga como si ya supiera” [He [the older brother] does and he teaches her [the younger sibling]. He asked her what’s this word and she says I don’t know. He says to her, read this. He doesn’t want me to help. He tells me that she knows the word. He thinks she would read].

In this family situation, the mother was encouraging her older child to help with the younger sibling because she had just had a baby and didn’t have much time to read to the children and she didn’t want them to lose their ability to read. All the mothers encouraged their children to interact with literacy whether it be siblings reading together, borrowing books from the library, or doing some activity with their books.

Families Negotiating Resources for Literacy

All seven of the mothers reported reading picture books to their children an average of two-three times per week. Access to books, including picture books and storybooks for children, varied among families. Twelve children had fewer than 10 books, four children had 10–20 books, and one had more than 20 books. According to the mothers, fathers, siblings, and grandparents occasionally engaged in reading picture books to the children. However, children looked at picturebooks primarily with their mothers.

A ellas les leo nomás cuando llego de la escuela, un librito así chiquito, les gusta más. Ellas están chiquitas todavía” [I read to my daughters when we arrive home from school. We read small books; they like them because they are very young]

commented one mother during a home visit. However, one mother commented:

“Ya no quieren que les lea, ellas ya se ponen a leer ellas solas ahí. Y en la noche también les digo ahora ya porque tienen que dormir. Ellas dicen estamos leyendo y ya ahora nos dormimos. Traen un montón de libros de la escuela y allí se ponen a leer, aunque sea un libro todas las noches” [They (the kids) don’t want me to read to them, they prefer to read the books by themselves. At night we have to tell them to stop reading because they have to go to sleep. They say that they are reading and that they are going to sleep soon. They bring a lot of books from school, and they read one book every night].

Even though the mother was not reading to her children, she was still very supportive of their independent reading and realized the importance of literacy.

We asked each mother where they got the books that they read with their children. One mother mentioned, “les dan prestados y después los regresan” [we borrow them (books) and return them afterward]. As we talked more about borrowing books from the school, she commented that she did not want to get a letter from the school stating that the books were missing or could not be found. She didn’t want the school to think they were keeping them forever. She felt part of her role as a parent was to ensure that her children were respectful in school and of school property. She explained that during a parent-teacher conference:

“Yo pregunto, verdad, cómo se portó y si ha hecho las tareas y ya al otro vengo y no le digo nada” [I ask questions about how he is behaving at school or if he is doing his homework].

She believed that her family’s reputation hinged on how well-behaved the children were at school.

Parents and families were constantly managing time resources around literacy.

“Pues por lo regular no estamos aquí en el día. Jennifer sí con su papá ahorita, pero por ejemplo ya después de la comida como a las seis-siete más o menos. Pero temprano y

yo trabajo los sábados y los domingos tengo que levantarlos temprano y irnos a la iglesia.” [We usually are not here during the day. Jennifer is with her dad now but usually they read after dinner at 6 or 7. I work on Saturdays, and I have to wake them up early and on Sundays we go to church, and we get up early too.]

“No tiene mucho tiempo ¿verdad?” [You don’t have much time, right?] “No, la verdad así es vida agitada. Con nuestras actividades y todo, pero ellos disfrutan cuando estamos en la casa, ¡Bien! Dicen, ¡nos vamos a quedar en la casa!” [No, we have busy lives. We have many activities, but they also enjoy being at home. They say, that’s good, we are staying at home today!]

Interacting with Schools

Parents are an important component of successful academic learning. While home and schools are often seen as separate spheres by families and educators, children operate in both spaces. Six out of seven mothers commented on interacting with the schools during our home visits and interviews. The message from the school was an indication that the growing understanding of multiliteracy is making its way into the interactions between schools and families.

“Sí en el otro porque así me han dicho en la escuela, si el niño habla español aquí no le perjudica, al contrario, él se va a desarrollar más en hablar inglés o leerlo y así también como en español.” [Yes, that’s what I’ve been told at school. If my children speak Spanish at home its beneficial for them. They are going to develop better language skills in English and Spanish.]

Although many parents expressed high expectations for the role of literacy in their children’s lives, many felt they did not have enough information, training, or confidence to connect existing home literacy activities with academic achievement, hoping that the English literacy classes for parents in the school would help. One parent commented about the English classes “Ahora están enseñando, van toda la semana y una maestra está enseñando inglés” [I signed up and now I am on

the waiting list. There is a teacher that is teaching English every day]. Another mother explained that:

“Oh, yo no sé nada de inglés. Por más que intento no se me queda. Pero voy a ir si Dios quiere en enero aquí en Harper que están dando ya” [I don’t know much English. I try as much as we can, but I just can’t retain it. But God willing. I will be going to English classes at Harper next January].

The parents wanted to participate in homework and other school events, however, they were not always able to support their children in the way that schools expected them too.

Two of the mothers were in English classes at Harper Elementary. As part of the English class, the mothers went into their children’s classrooms. One mother explained,

“Sí hacemos trabajo para las maestras así como recortar y más. Nos estamos quedando como dos horas y yo llevo a este y él está ahí con los otros en el salón. Pero ahorita me han dicho que sí se va a quedar en la escuela porque ahora lo llevo a la escuela y está viendo a los otros niños. Cuando vaya a la escuela muchos lloran, pero se me hace que a él sí le va a gustar. Pues si nosotros así estamos en la escuela” [We do some work to help the teachers like cutting out and other things. We are there for two hours and I bring him (her younger child) with me. He is there with the other kids in the classroom. I’ve been told by the teachers that it will be easy for him to stay in school because he is watching the other kids. Some kids cry when they go to school for the first time, but I think he is going to like it. We both go to school].

These classroom experiences allowed the mothers to better understand the school system in the United States while allowing the teachers to get to know the mothers. However, it is vital to work with those classroom teachers in examining how they can use the mothers as support instead of menial tasks such as cutting items out. Parents should truly be authentic educational partners and participate in meaningful and effective ways in their children’s classrooms. This could be a time where the teacher gains awareness of the family’s funds of knowledge and shares those strengths with the classroom.

Discussion

The thematic analysis of this study showed that families used a complex set of practices to navigate the bilingual landscape. Bilingual books helped parents and children negotiate the space between the languages. They provided an opportunity for all family members to participate in picture-book reading (Grolig, 2020; Roberts, 2008) whether it be parent to child or sibling to sibling. Anderson et al. (1985) reported nearly four decades ago that picture-book reading was the “single most important activity for developing the knowledge required for eventual success in reading” (p.23) and that research claim is continually being validated (e.g., Montag et al., 2015; Sénéchal and Levre, 2002, 2014). This study showed that bilingual books are being used by bilingual families more effectively with monolingual books.

This study confirmed the finding of Perry (2009) who studied family practices of Sudanese refugee families in Michigan. She found that very young children were “engaging in very sophisticated brokering about texts and simultaneously displaying their emerging knowledge of complex literacy practices” (Perry, 2009, pg. 274) as they helped their families negotiate a new language and culture. Interactions between siblings around literacy is something that Gregory et al. (2004) demonstrated in their study of the roles that siblings play in supporting literacy learning. Their study showed how younger children’s language and literacy benefited from their older siblings’ teaching but also how the older children’s language and literacy were enhanced. In our study, children often supported their parents and siblings while reading the English text of the bilingual book as the mothers reinforced the Spanish. Older children learned ways to present information siblings, teaching them important literacy skills while enhancing and reinforcing their own literacy in the synergistic manner described by Gregory (2005).

Ferrer (2007) observed that deficit-based theories have influenced the narratives that schools have had about Hispanic families. Educators often expect a literacy deficit because there is a perceived cultural and linguistic mismatch between the school and the parents (Edwards, Paratere, and Roser, 2009). Latinx parents are often viewed as not being able to support their children’s academic success, and

their involvement is either unrecognized or perceived as counter-productive by many educators and administrators (Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008), despite evidence to the contrary (Trainin et al., 2017; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Ada & Zubuizarreta, 2001). In our study, we found that bilingual parents perceived the schools as supporting and valuing bilingual abilities.

Conclusion

Bilingual families are providing literacy-rich environments and want to be involved in the educational development of their children. Through individual interviews, conversations, and home observations, a wealth of information can be obtained about specific family situations as well as parental perceptions and expectations of the uses and functions of literacy in their lives. Home visits can play an important role in connecting and building relationships with the families while developing mutual respect that supports the attainment of literacy skills and goals. By conducting home visits and observing literacy events in the home, we can come to understand families' views of literacy, how they share literature with their children, the influence of their own literacy history, and their changing conceptions of literacy learning as their children are learning English (Barton et al., 2000). The families opened their homes to us, the children expressed their enthusiasm in reading and the mothers shared their literacy joys and concerns.

Providing access to books is an important aspect of literacy. However, getting access to bilingual books is more difficult in public libraries, school libraries, and classrooms. In this study, we were able to provide bilingual books to families and observe how the books were used to generate engagement in literacy learning in the home. We experienced children with their siblings in book reading and parents teaching and learning from the bilingual books alongside their children. Bilingual books can provide a bridge to both languages which can lead to appreciation and understanding of both. Access to readable books is a critical piece in the literacy and language development of children.

Parents provide a wealth of family tradition, knowledge, and experience for their children. The home learning environment is critical in

influencing children's acquisition and mastery of reading skills in different ways. Due to the importance of the home environment in literacy acquisition and language development, the creation and assurance of children's opportunity to engage in literacy experiences should be the priority of families (Fosnot, 2013). However, families tend to be busy with demanding work schedules, daily home activities, and a variety of other outside commitments (Heath et al., 2014). The families had shown us that even with the pressure of daily life they could create consistent literacy routines in which they reserved time for literacy and language learning.

Emerging bilingual children need our support and our belief that they can become biliterate. It is important to provide materials in the native language so parents can assist their children in oral language and literacy development at home. The Spanish skills they learn will benefit them as they develop English language competency in school.

As researchers we must act to dismantle a deficit view of Latinx families. First, any research should examine strengths and opportunities to avoid focusing solely on challenges. Second, researchers should attend to the experiences of families negotiating bilingual and bicultural worlds. Finally, researchers can and should critically examine and labels attached to students (such as at-risk, underachieving, or failing) by schools and other social institutions, and reframe them within a more inclusive context. Researchers should keep exploring how labeling, expectations, and mismatch between home and school expectations lead to emphasizing challenges and ignoring strengths.

Limitations and Next Steps

This design study focused on bilingual families; however, mothers were the only family members beside the children to be involved in the project. In the future, we will try to recruit fathers and other extended family members to learn about their literacy practices and how they impact children's learning and engagement with print. In subsequent studies we will focus on longitudinal measurement of language and literacy skills on both home language and English.

Implications for Teachers

Our findings have implications for current and future teachers when it comes to having bilingual or multilingual students in the classrooms. One implication is that access to bilingual books for the students and families is critical. The access can be a combination of books in the classroom, in the school library, and in public libraries. Having multiple options can increase the variety of bilingual books available and create richer literacy events. Bilingual books provide an opportunity for all family members to interact with texts while maintaining the native language. Bilingual books provide families a sense of competency while bridging connections to English and enhancing the knowledge base of their children.

Teachers of bilingual or multilingual students should create opportunities for families to share language and literacy practices as they step into a listening and learning role. By learning about specific literacy practices, teachers can understand the richness their students bring to school and better plan in and out of school activities. For example, after learning that a child is reading to their siblings, the teacher can help select just right books that provide effective independent reading at home.

Finally, learning from families about their practices can reduce the impact of assumptions made about bilingual families and students. Many of these assumptions cast bilinguals in a negative light. However, in this study, we show all the different ways that families are engaging in literacy practices which contribute to the language and literacy development of their children and have positive impact on family engagement.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following questions were for the initial interview:

1. What types of things do you read? For what purpose? Do you like to read?
2. Where do you get reading materials?
3. Have you helped your child learn to read? In what ways?
4. How often do you read with your child?
5. Can you show me how you used the reading materials with your child?
6. What are their attitudes toward bilingualism?
7. What kinds of practices does the family engage in that could be conducive to literacy learning in a bilingual context?

Questions for the Second and Third Interviews:

- What is your role as a parent in your children's lives?
- How do you help your child with their biliteracy/bilingual development?
- What are ways that you encourage your children's literacy development?
- What do you do to support your children's writing?
- What games or activities are played at home?

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