

RUNNING HEAD: AFFECTING LATINO PRESCHOOLERS' LITERACY

Affecting Latino Preschoolers' Literacy Through Increased Reading Opportunities

BY DANNY BRASSELL, PH.D.
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, TEACHER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY – DOMINGUEZ HILLS
1000 E. VICTORIA ST., SOE-1036
CARSON, CA 90747
dbrassell@csudh.edu

& ELIZABETH HORTON, M.Sc.
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, TEACHER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY – DOMINGUEZ HILLS
1000 E. VICTORIA ST., SOE-1031
CARSON, CA 90747
ehorton@csudh.edu

PAPER SUBMITTED AND TO BE PRESENTED AT THE 2003 HAWAII
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION

Abstract

The present study looked at 84 preschoolers at a daycare center serving predominantly low-SES Latinos in downtown Los Angeles. The primary purpose of the present study was threefold: (1) to examine the effects of an early literacy intervention in the form of a Classroom Literacy program and Book-Loan program on the early reading conceptualizations of young, Spanish-speaking preschoolers, (2) to examine the effect of parent participation in a Book-Loan program on children's early reading conceptualizations and (3) to determine what particular areas of Latino preschoolers' early reading conceptualizations were affected by aspects of the intervention. Results indicated that the intervention had a significant impact on measures of students' early reading conceptualizations. Evaluations conducted in Spanish in the present study provided great insight into how second-language learners can improve their early conceptualizations of reading with encouragement and resources in their primary language.

Introduction

Shifts in the labor force have spurred unprecedented changes to the landscape of American society (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987, 1990, 1993, 1997). Presently, almost 80 percent of mothers with children under the age of five have entered full-time employment, fueling an unprecedented need for child daycare and pre-school education services (Schuman & Relihan, 1990). Particularly, daycare centers and preschools, then, have begun to play a more prominent role in providing young children with literacy experiences. Accessibility to reading materials has also become of greater concern to these programs. This early exposure to print takes on even greater importance among students from culturally diverse and low- socioeconomic status (SES) environments (August & Hakuta, 1997).

In spite of a variety of federal programs aimed at assisting these students, the number of children considered to be “at-risk” of educational failure has continued to grow dramatically (Morra, 1994). Significant differences in later reading achievement have been found between low-SES and middle- to upper-SES students (Lonigan, Burgess, Anthony & Barker, 1998), prompting an ever-widening gap that places low-SES students at a significant educational disadvantage to their peers (Juel, 1988; Stanovich, 1986). Carr (1994) found that limited opportunities with print are more likely to exist in the homes of low-SES students and second language learners. Young students who have limited access to reading materials have been found to have less motivation to read (Baker, Afflerbach & Reinking, 1996), which negatively affects at-risk students’ reading achievement throughout their subsequent schooling.

Latino students are the most rapidly growing student population group in the United States (Populations Projections Program, 2000; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1991), and at-risk Latino children, in particular, have been identified as being in need of

early educational interventions at preschools and daycare centers (U.S. Department of Education, 1992). Faced with a variety of economic and language barriers, many young Latino children have become overwhelmed. Consequently, Latino preschoolers often find themselves behind their peers upon entry into primary school, forcing them to constantly play “catch up” (Stanovich, 1986). A disproportionate number of these students suffer later academic failure (De la Rosa & Maw, 1990; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996), forcing researchers to examine interventions and assessments that may help prevent future educational difficulties.

Early home literacy experiences have been shown to vary greatly, especially among different lower-income communities (Heath, 1983; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). Allington and Cunningham (1996) pointed out that several surveys of American primary school teachers have revealed that their greatest educational concern is the fact that many students, primarily those who are classified as being at-risk, are not yet “ready” when they enter school. Many students simply have much more limited literacy experiences and opportunities than others, causing them to have a disadvantage upon entering school. McCormick and Mason (1986), for example, found that just over half of low-SES parents provided alphabet books in the homes of their preschoolers, as opposed to almost all more affluent parents. Heath (1983), on the contrary, argued that the home literacy experiences of two groups of low-SES students she observed in a longitudinal study were plentiful but often different from the behaviors reinforced in school, but she also noted that a limited amount of literacy materials existed in the homes she studied. Research (e.g., Baker, Afflerbach & Reinking, 1996; Goldenberg, 1989; Sonnenschein, Brody & Munsterman, 1996) has shown that when a wide range of literacy materials in the home exists and parents read with their children, children read more. Increased exposure to

books in the home has also been shown to lead to increased reading achievement at school (Goldenberg, Reese & Gallimore, 1992).

The literacy resources schools provide children are obviously important in considering children's emergent literacy development. Many studies have shown how students from lower-income areas are negatively affected by limited literacy materials in their daycare centers (see review in Neuman, 1999). Trying to prevent a major discrepancy between "the haves and the have-nots" as young children enter primary school, researchers have begun to examine the role daycare centers can play in the literacy development of at-risk students. Since middle-class and upper-class students are considered to have greater access to books in the home and at the educational facilities they attend (Constantino, 1995; Smith, Constantino & Krashen, 1996), a greater emphasis in educational research has been placed on examining the experiences and abilities of lower-SES students.

The impact of increased reading materials made accessible to low-SES students has become of particular interest, as these students comprise the majority of the pre-school population (Marx & Seligson, 1988). In several studies of students in developing countries (see reviews in Elley, 1998; Greaney, 1996), it was shown that increased access to books at school increases low-SES students' literacy capabilities. Here in the United States the increased availability of books to students has translated into better knowledge of vocabulary, comprehension, spelling and general knowledge (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992). "Book floods," programs that inundate educational facilities with increased book caches, have been shown to promote increased reading, which leads to greater improvements in literacy development (Elley, 1992; Neuman, 1999). This, in turn, has been shown to lead to improved attitude toward reading and enhanced language acquisition.

Therefore, the present study sought to explore and describe how young Latino children's early exposure to books (at age four) through a voluntary, home intervention and a classroom early literacy program impacted their early conceptualizations of reading. The primary purposes of the study were to examine: (a) what early conceptualizations these children have of reading, (b) how various measures of students' personal participation in a Book-Loan program affect these children's early reading conceptualizations and (c) what areas of children's early reading conceptualizations were or were not significantly affected as a result of early literacy interventions at preschool.

Literature Review

The present study looked at emergent literacy through a developmental and constructivist point of view. Utilizing this perspective, literacy is continuously developing and expanding from birth through informal experiences (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Teale and Sulzby (1986) have pointed out that children's early reading conceptualizations are formed from birth, and these conceptualizations "set the stage" for children's reading achievement in their subsequent schooling (Roskos & Neuman, 1993).

A growing body of research has evolved in recent years concerning the effectiveness of preschool educational programs, particularly those serving poor and culturally diverse students (Legters & Slavin, 1992; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1993). Numerous studies (e.g., Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst, Epstein, Angell, Payne, Crone & Fischel, 1994) have focused their efforts on providing more books in the homes of low-income families and in providing increased exposure to storybook reading activities in the classroom. For example, in a series of studies using the Little Books program aimed at encouraging parent-child and teacher-child book reading, Mason and colleagues (Mason, Kerr, Sinha, & McCormick, 1990;

McCormick & Mason, 1989; Phillips, Norris, & Mason, 1996; Phillips, Norris, Mason, & Kerr, 1990) found that increasing the opportunity for involvement in more storybook reading at home led to steady progress toward higher emergent reading levels in preschool and kindergarten Head Start children during the first years of the intervention. In another study particularly relevant to the population of the present investigation, researchers distributed simple, predictable books in Spanish (Libros) to 16 families whose primary language was Spanish and found that literacy scores improved overall for the children involved (Goldenberg, Reese & Gallimore, 1992).

More commonly, researchers both in the U.S. and abroad are recognizing that any long-term impact on students' literacy achievement is dependent upon a context in which children have access to a network of supports related to literacy behaviors. For example, in a 23-week emergent literacy program implemented in 19 nursery schools in rural South Africa, a treatment group of 21 nursery school children - even though eight months younger than the comparison groups - increased in their knowledge of book handling, word recognition, and print more than children not participating in these activities where: (a) indigenous cultural values were incorporated into the curriculum, and (b) teachers and primary care-givers conducted activities related to storytelling, storyreading and informal engagement with written materials in the children's first language, Zulu (Kriegler, Ramarumo, Van der Ryst, Van Niekerk & Winer, 1994).

Further, in a two-year study with primary grade children, Englert, Garmon, Mariage, Rozendal, Tarrant, & Urba (1995) reported that the increased writing, reading comprehension, and metacognitive knowledge scores for students in the program could not be associated with any one facet of the program. Rather, the researchers stressed that (a) the holistic nature of the learning experiences, (b) the teachers' "ownership" over time of the projects' principles and curriculum and (c) the sense that a "literate community"

was established between students, teachers, and the wider community were crucial components in making their program a success.

Therefore, the emergent literacy program implemented in the classroom as well as the structure of the Book-Loan program designed for this population of young English language learners was meant to incorporate the key features shared by successful comprehensive programs (see also Nielsen and Monson, 1996; Otto, 1993; Sulzby, Branz & Brule, 1993 for other examples) which have included (a) drawing children in as socially competent partners, (b) allowing them to experiment with print without undue duress, (c) providing them with a variety of adult- and peer-mediated dialogue about literature and ways to read and write, and (d) creating any number of opportunities for them to practice their unconventional, yet emerging skills in reading and writing.

Methodology

The subjects of the present study were a total of 84 pre-school children who were enrolled in two, four-year old classrooms over a two-year period in consecutive cohorts (1998/1999 or 1999/2000) at a privately-funded, inner-city daycare facility that serves predominantly low-SES, Latino students in an urban area of the Southwest. All students participated in the classroom literacy program and, to varying degrees, the Book-Loan program.

According to the daycare center's records, more than half of the students lived in single-parent households, and almost all of the families had incomes below federal poverty guidelines. In addition, Spanish was the primary language of communication in nearly all of the households, and most of the parents worked in the nearby garment and toy wholesale districts that comprise the city's "skid row."

During each year, both pre- and posttests of Clay's Concepts About Print (CAP) assessment in Spanish (Escamilla, Andrade, Basurto, Ruiz & Clay, 1996), were administered. In addition, the total number of books checked out by each child was tallied as well as the length of time (in months) that the child participated in the program over the year from September through June.

The weekly intervention included instituting a big-book shared reading program, installing writing centers, and purchasing over 1,000 children's books for both the Book-Loan program and the two four-year-old classrooms. Additionally, members of the research team provided in-classroom support, feedback and modeling at least twice a week throughout the school year as well as on-going, monthly in-services regarding emergent literacy theory, instructional activities, and developmental growth patterns in reading and writing for childcare agency teachers and paraprofessionals. For the most part, the intensive instructional portion of the program took place during the morning hours between 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. - depending upon recess schedules - and was approximately two hours in length. Finally, the parent Book-Loan was open two days a week and parental workshops on reading aloud at home and other ways to encourage their children's awareness and knowledge of literacy materials and activities were included each semester at fall and spring parent receptions.

Results/Discussion

When evaluating the outcomes of the emergent literacy intervention, each of the cohort groups experienced a significant difference in their CAP scores from pretests in November to posttests in June (a six-month period). Furthermore, these improvements in performance were not a result of a select few students improving, as almost all of the students showed improvement in their scores from pretest to posttest. In particular,

students made gains from pretest to posttest on items classified by Day and Day (1979) as “print-direction concepts” and “letter-word concepts.” For example, on the pretest, while only 25 percent of the preschoolers began to read in the top left corner of the page, continuing from left to right, top to bottom, nearly 70 percent of the students demonstrated correct directional behaviors on the posttest. In addition, while only 5 percent of the students correctly demonstrated the concepts of “first” and “last” in multiple lines, words in sentences or letters in words at the time of the pretest, 60 percent of the same students were successful six months later.

The present study also revealed that there was a low but significant correlation between the number of months in which books were checked out and the CAP scores. Interestingly, no significant relationship was shown between the number of books students checked-out and the CAP posttest scores. However, as Goldenberg et al. (1992) have hypothesized, simple frequency counts of types of interactions parents provide for children at home or, as in our study, number of books checked-out, while easy to calculate or categorize, seem to be relatively insensitive measurements of the quality of home storybook activities.

Few studies have looked at how increased access to books affects preschool students in particular, and those that have show that increased book access for preschoolers positively affects their reading (see review in Dowhower & Beagle, 1998; Neuman, 1999). Similarly, while the correlation was lower than we might have expected, the relationship between sustained home literacy activity and increased test performance in literacy was maintained in our study. In addition, as federal and state educational reforms have pushed for greater achievement and quality instructional programs at the pre-school level, the present study offers data substantiating the effects of combined literacy activities on low-SES Latino pre-school students’ conceptualizations of reading.

A growing body of educators and researchers have become interested in the early reading conceptualization levels of preschoolers, particularly those who are second language learners. Early literacy interventions such as the Emergent Literacy program offered in the present study seemed to have significantly impacted the ways young children view print. The data gathered in the study supported a number of findings found in previous studies and expanded the scope of emergent literacy interventions to include comprehensive classroom and home programs that support and promote students' home language and culture. Evaluations conducted in Spanish in the present study provided great insight into how second-language learners can improve their early conceptualizations of reading with encouragement and resources in their primary language.

References

- Allington, R.L., & Cunningham, P.M. (1996). Schools that work: Where all children read and write. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Anderson, R. C., Wilson, P. T., & Fielding, L. G. (1988). Growth in reading and how children spend their time outside of school. Reading Research Quarterly, *23*, 285-303.
- August, D., & Hakuta, K. (Eds.). (1997). Improving schooling for language minority children: A research agenda. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Baker, L., Afflerbach, P., & Reinking, D. (1996). Developing engaged readers in school and home communities. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Carr, E. M. (1994). It takes a whole village to raise a child: Supplementing instruction for "at-risk" kindergarten students. In D. F. Lancy (Ed.), Children's emergent literacy: From research to practice (pp. 237-249). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Clay, M. M. (1979). Early detections of reading disabilities. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Clay, M. M. (1993). An observation survey of early literacy achievement. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Constantino, R. (1995). Two small girls, one big disparity. The Reading Teacher, *48* (6), 504-505.
- Day, K. C., & Day, H. D. (1979). Development of kindergarten children's understanding of concepts about print and oral language. In M. L. Kamil & A. H. Moe (Eds.), Twenty-eighth Yearbook of the National Reading Conference (pp. 19-22). Clemson, SC: National Reading Conference.

Day, K. C., Day, H. D., Spicola, R., & Griffin, M. (1981). The development of orthographic linguistic awareness in kindergarten children and the relationship of this awareness to later reading achievement. Reading Psychology, 2, 76-87.

De La Rosa, D., & Maw, C. (1990). Hispanic education: A statistical portrait 1990. Washington, DC: Policy Analysis Center, Office of Research Advocacy and Legislation, National Council of La Raza (NCLR).

Dickinson, D. K., & Smith, M. W. (1994). Long-term effects of preschool teachers' book readings on low-income children's vocabulary and story comprehension. Reading Research Quarterly, 29 (2), 105-122.

Dowhower, S. L., & Beagle, K. G. (1998). The print environment in kindergartens: A study of conventional and holistic teachers and their classrooms in three settings. Reading Research and Instruction, 37 (3), 161-190.

Escamilla, K., Andrade, A. M., Basurto, A.G. M., Ruiz, O. A., & Clay, M. M. (1996). Instrumento de observación de los logros de la lecto - escritura inicial. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Elley, W. (1998). Raising literacy levels in third world countries: A method that works. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.

Englert, C. S., Garmon, M. A., Mariage, T. V., Rozendal, M. S., Tarrant, K. L. & Urba. (1995). The early literacy project: Connecting across the literacy curriculum. Learning Disability Quarterly, 18 (4), 253-75.

Ferreiro, E., & Teberosky, A. (1982). Literacy before schooling. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Goldenberg, C. (1989). Parent's effects on academic grouping for reading: Three case studies. American Educational Research Journal, 26 (3), 329-352.

Goldenberg, C., Reese, L., & Gallimore, R. (1992). Effects of literacy materials from school on Latino children's home experiences and early reading achievement. American Journal of Education, 100, 497-536.

Goodman, Y. (1986). Children coming to know literacy. In W. H. Teale & E. Sulzby (Eds.), Emergent literacy: Writing and reading (pp. 1-14). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Greaney, V. (1996). Promoting reading in developing countries. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Heath, S. B. (1983). Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Johns, J. (1980). First graders' concepts about print. Reading Research Quarterly, 15, 529-549.

Juel, C. (1988). Learning to read and write: A longitudinal study of 54 children from first through fourth grades. Journal of Educational Psychology, 80, 437-447.

Kriegler, F., Ramarumo, M., Van der Ryst, M., Van Niekirk, K., & Winer, Y. (1994). Supporting emergent literacy in print-bereft rural communities. School Psychology International, 15, 23-37.

Lonigan, C. J., Burgess, S. R., Anthony, J. L., & Barker, T. A. (1998). Development of phonological sensitivity in 2- to 5-year-old children. Journal of Educational Psychology, 90, 294-311.

Mason, J. M., Kerr, B. M., Sinha, S., & McCormick, C. E. (1990). Shared-book reading in an Early Start program for at-risk children. National Reading Conference Yearbook, 39, 189-198.

McCormick, C. E., & Mason, J. M. (1989). Fostering reading for Head Start children with little books. In J. Allen & J. Mason (Eds.), Risk makers, risk takers, risk breakers (pp. 154-177). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Morra, L. G. (1994). School-age children: Poverty and diversity challenge schools nationwide. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, Division of Human Resources.

Morrow, L. M., & Weinstein, C. (1986). Encouraging voluntary reading: The impact of a literature program on children's use of library centers. Reading Research Quarterly, 21, 330-346.

National Center for Education Statistics. (1996). NAEP 1994 reading: A first look. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Educational Statistics.

Neuman, S. B. (1999). Books make a difference: A study of access to literacy. Reading Research Quarterly, 34 (3), 286-311.

Nielson, D. C., & Monson, D. L. (1996). Effects of literacy environment of literacy development of kindergarten children. Journal of Educational Research, 89, 259-271.

Otto, B. W. (1993). Signs of emergent literacy among inner-city Kindergartners in a storybook reading program. Reading and Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties, 9 (2), 151-62.

Phillips, L. M., Norris, S. P., & Mason, J. M. (1996). Longitudinal effects of early literacy concepts on reading achievement: A kindergarten intervention and five-year follow-up. Journal of Literacy Research, 28, 173-195

Reese, L., Garnier, H., Gallimore, R., & Goldenberg, C. (2000). Longitudinal analysis of the antecedents of emergent Spanish literacy and middle-school English reading achievement of Spanish-speaking students. American Educational Research Journal, 37 (3), 633-662.

Roskos, K., & Neuman, S. (1993). Language and literacy in the early years: An integrated approach. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Schuman, D. R., & Relihan, J. J. (1990). The caregiver's role in emergent literacy. Children Today, 19 (September/October), 20-21.

Smith, C., Constantino, R., & Krashen, S. (1996). Differences in print environment for children in Beverly Hills, Compton and Watts. Emergency Librarian, 24 (4), 8-9.

Snow, C. E. (1990). Rationales for native language instruction: Evidence from research. In A. M. Padilla, H. H. Fairchild & C. M. Valadez (Eds.), Bilingual education: Issues and strategies. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Snow, C., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). Preventing reading difficulties in young children. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Sonnenschein, S., Brody, G., & Munsterman, K. (1996). The influence of family beliefs and practices on children's early reading development. In L. Baker, P. Afflerbach, & D. Reinking (Eds.), Developing engaged readers in school and home communities (pp. 3-20). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Sulzby, E. (1985). Children's emergent reading of favorite storybooks: A developmental study. Reading Research Quarterly, 20, 458-481.

Sulzby, E., Branz, C. M., & Buhle, R. (1993). Repeated readings of literature and low socioeconomic black kindergartners and first graders. Reading and Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Disabilities, 9, 183-196.

Teale, W. H. (1990). The promise and challenge of informal assessment in early literacy. In L. Morrow & J. Smith (Eds.), Assessment for instruction in early literacy (pp. 45-61). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

- Teale, W. H., & Sulzby, E. (1986). Emergent literacy: Writing and reading. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1987). After-school care of school age children, December, 1984 (Current Population Reports, Series P-23, No. 149). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1990). The Hispanic population in the United States: March 1989 (Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 444). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1993). We the American Hispanics. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (1997). United States Department of Commerce. Economic and Statistics Administration.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. (1991). The Hispanic population of the United States: March 1990. (Current Population Reports, Series P-25 No 995). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Education (1992). Fourth annual dropout report to Congress. Washington, DC: Author.
- Yaden, Jr., D. B. (1982). A multivariate analysis of first graders' print awareness as related to reading achievement, intelligence, and gender. Dissertation Abstracts International, 43, 1912A. (University Microfilms No. 8225520)
- Yaden, Jr., D. B., Smolkin, L. B., & Conlon, A. (1989). Preschoolers' questions about pictures, print conventions, and story text during home read-alouds. Reading Research Quarterly, 24, 188-214.