

Pathways to literacy for children from Spanish-speaking homes

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Introduction: Schools, SES, and achievement

There is currently a debate raging in this country about which plays a larger role in determining educational outcomes, schools or socioeconomic circumstances¹. The debate is of course not new. It dates back 40 years to the landmark Coleman Report of 1966. And even before the Coleman report, educators, social scientists, and other observers for years had wondered and argued about the problem of social inequality and how and whether it can be ameliorated. It's been the stuff of wars and revolutions, both military and intellectual.

In its most recent 21st century incarnation, the debate is still about whether schools can offset the negative effects of low socioeconomic status on student academic success. Two camps currently frame the debate. On the one hand are advocates of high academic standards for all and excuses for none (or almost none). This side argues the logic of high-stakes accountability and uses high-achieving schools with large numbers of low-SES students ("defying the odds" or "high-flying" schools) to demonstrate that unequal social circumstances do not preclude equal educational outcomes (Education Trust, Fordham Foundation). If a few schools can do it, the argument goes, then all, or nearly all, should. On the other hand, there are those who argue that blaming schools for unequal educational outcomes is at best misguided and at worst a screen for dismantling public education. This side points to persistent social-class based differences in student outcomes that schools alone could not possibly overcome (Berliner, Rothstein). Further, this side argues, comparisons based on the "high-flying" schools are fundamentally flawed either because they either exploit statistical quirks or compare non-comparable student populations (Harris).

At the risk of disappointing everyone, let me acknowledge at the outset that I will not even attempt to mediate or resolve this dispute. First, I do not know enough to be able to do so. Second, I admit that I have a fair amount of sympathy for both perspectives: I have no doubt that the vast majority of schools could be doing a better job educating socio-economically at risk students; but I do wonder about the limits of what the school alone can achieve in light of the many challenges faced by students and families from poverty backgrounds. Still, this should not obscure the important point we should all be able to agree upon, namely, that large numbers of students do not achieve as well as they should nor at levels of which they are capable. Precisely what those levels are and the exact relative impact of school and economic circumstances, I don't really know and I will leave to others to try and sort out. It is a very complex topic indeed.

In this chapter I will add to the complexity and raise more questions than I answer. I apologize for this, but I can't help it. I have for a number of years been studying and working with Latino populations, mostly in immigrant communities in California and Texas. Among many Latinos in this country low economic levels and low

¹ I wish to acknowledge the contributions made to my thinking by various participants in EDDRA, a listserv moderated by Gerald Bracey (eddra@yahoogroups.com)

educational attainment levels are a persistent reality. But there is another persistent reality that adds an additional level of complexity: Growing up in a bilingual world. For most children from Spanish-speaking homes, language is layered onto all the other issues we have to sort through in our efforts to understand the role of economic status on school attainment.

Plan for the chapter

In this chapter I will:

1. Review key findings from two recent syntheses of research on promoting achievement among language-minority students (sometimes called English language learners or ELLs). Topics covered include: Language use in school and academic achievement (teaching children to read and write in their home language makes a positive, although modest, contribution to academic achievement in a second language, e.g., English); components of effective schools, classrooms, and instruction for English learners when instructed in English (very similar to effective components for English speakers, but accommodations are necessary, mostly because of limited English proficiency).
2. Review the mixed findings about the relationship between language use at home and Spanish-speaking children's literacy achievement. In contrast to the clear findings from classroom research that instruction in the primary language confers achievement benefits in *the second language*, research involving homes is much less clear. Some studies show a *negative* correlation between use of one language in the home (e.g., Spanish) and children's language and literacy achievement in a second language (e.g., English). Other studies, including two experiments, point in a direction that is more consistent with the classroom research.
3. Review the even more limited research on community effects on Spanish-speaking children's language and literacy development. To date, we have found none. Although communities with substantial numbers of Spanish-speaking families vary considerably in the language and literacy resources they afford, community characteristics seem to have no relationship with family practices or child outcomes in the first years of elementary school. Family practices affect child outcomes; community characteristics do not.
4. Finally, (a) where possible, discuss the implications of the findings for creating pathways to literacy for Spanish-speaking children and (b) identify key questions we must address and how we might go about addressing them in order to find and create more and increasingly robust pathways for these children's success in school and beyond.

Possible questions for the audience:

Does it make sense that components of effective instruction for English learners are probably very similar to components of effective instruction for English speakers?

How different do you think our research base on ELLs (and findings therefrom) would be if the bulk of the research were with middle- and higher-SES students rather than with low-income students?

What do you make of the findings that home experiences in one language (e.g., Spanish) are positively associated with language and literacy outcomes in that language but negatively associated with language and literacy outcomes in the other language (e.g., English), yet classroom research shows fairly consistently that instruction in the home language (e.g., Spanish) promotes positive outcomes in the second language (e.g., English)?