

## RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Perceptions of East Coast Migrant Head Start Programs and Multilingual Families' Communication

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Multilingual families experience unique barriers as they seek to partner with schools to educate their children. This research study explored parents' perceptions of access to multilingual early childhood programs and their perception of the communication process between multiple stakeholders of an early childhood program in their rural multilingual community. Data were collected from forty-two families in a rural multilingual community in North Carolina with and without children in an early childhood Head Start Program, using surveys and focus group interviews in Spanish and English. Results revealed that most families believe they have access to the Head Start program and a positive perception of the communication processes. However, barriers related to enrollment and cultural and linguistic issues persist. This study has implications for multilingual families' access to early childhood programs, such as Head Start programs, and their children's future career and life prospects.

*Keywords:* multilingual education, early childhood education, migrant families, Head Start multilingual programs

## INTRODUCTION

This study investigated families' perceptions of multilingual early childhood programs, notably Head Start, and their partnership and communication with various stakeholders. The findings offered insights for educators, program managers, and policymakers aiming to enhance early childhood education, especially for multilingual learners.

The findings revealed that families firmly believed that Head Start programs positively influence their children's academic, social, and emotional development, aligning with established research on high-quality preschool programs (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Pungello et al., 2010; Reynolds et al., 2011; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Furthermore, multilingual learners in Head Start programs outperform their peers in various developmental areas (Stanley et al., 2016). In addition, families perceived Head Start programs as beneficial for their children's social and emotional development, consistent with prior research emphasizing early childhood program benefits (Stanley et al., 2016; Stork & Sanders, 2008).

Early exposure to literacy and mathematics is crucial for cognitive development (Stork & Sanders, 2008). Likewise, families believed Head Start programs were pivotal in enhancing their children's language acquisition and preserving their language identity. This finding aligns with research indicating Head Start's advantages for multilingual learners (Puma et al., 2010). Language development is essential for family unity and academic success (Justice et al., 2020; Sawyer et al., 2017; Smith, 2020).

Families perceived their partnership with Head Start programs as a robust channel for communication, a notable departure from earlier research documenting communication barriers in multilingual early childhood programs (Sawyer et al., 2017; Schneider & Arnot, 2018). Effective family engagement, as demonstrated in various studies (Guo, 2010; Epstein et al., 2018; Gichuru et al., 2015; Kossek & Burke, 2014; LiBetti, 2019), is pivotal for children's academic achievement and cultural awareness. A key element in achieving this success involves establishing effective relationships with families, a fundamental aspect of community-focused interventions (Jasis & Marriott, 2010).

The study underscores the need to maintain and enhance family-centered approaches in Head Start programs. Educators should provide comprehensive training in family-focused practices, including reciprocal communication and family engagement. Ongoing learning opportunities, such as additional training and peer coaching, can empower teachers to support diverse families more effectively. Program managers should consider strategic recruitment efforts to strengthen access to program resources and services, especially for families who still need to enroll. Thus, this research provides valuable insights into families' perceptions of Head Start programs, highlighting their positive impact on development, language acquisition, and family partnerships. Implementing these recommendations can create more inclusive, supportive, and impactful early childhood education for multilingual learners and their families.

## SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

Multilingualism plays a crucial role in developing and preserving literacy for children's home languages (García, 2003; Justice et al., 2020; Kostoulas & Motsiou, 2020; Sawyer et al., 2017; Smith, 2020; Surrain, 2021). Accordingly, plurilingual children's families believe in the importance of multilingualism and are devoted to creating a strong multilingual environment at home (García, 2003; Kostoulas & Motsiou, 2020;). However, although many families seek to develop their children's English skills, children's language identity formation can be thwarted without ongoing development of their home languages, and their family home language

connections can be disrupted.

Multilingual families think highly of the value of language identity formation and literacy at home and pay attention to professional multilingual education opportunities (Dos Santos, 2019; Smith, 2020). The reasons were that immigrant families understood the significant status of English in contemporary society, and learning English paved the way for children's future careers and economic prosperity.

Multilingual families place importance on positive parent-teacher relationships and value themselves as crucial participants in the collaboration between home and school (Sawyer et al., 2017). However, studies have pointed out barriers that hinder school-home communication. For example, previous studies found that families' inability to access and comprehend education jargon and discrepancies in parental knowledge from teachers' and families' perspectives hinder school-home communication (Larios & Zetlin, 2018; Sawyer et al., 2017; Schneider & Arnot, 2018). These barriers to school-home communication can be developed through school-initiated interventions, including employing bilingual assistants and bilingual liaisons (Guo, 2010; Wong-Villacres et al., 2019).

## CURRENT STUDY

This study aimed to explore perceptions of partnership and how (mis)communication in school-home relationships affects engagement between multilingual communities and early childhood education programs. The following research questions guided our study:

1. How do families perceive their access to multilingual early childhood programs?
2. How do families perceive the partnership and communication processes between multiple stakeholders of early childhood programs in their rural multilingual community?

To answer the research questions, we utilized a survey focused on two categories: (1) Families with children in the Head Start program and (2) Families without children in the program. Following the survey, families were invited to focus group interviews, which were available online in English and Spanish.

A key feature of the online survey was its emphasis on the intersection of communication, language, motivation, and engagement. Forty-two participants completed the surveys. Seven of these participants had their children already enrolled in the Head Start program, while 37 participants were prospective families of the Head Start program. The researchers conducted a focus group interview based on the survey results to gain additional information about participants' responses to the survey. The focus group interview consisted of eight open-ended questions. The interviews focused on the benefits of the Head Start program, communication, access to the program, and the potential support the program could provide to multilingual children. Moreover, focus group interviews examined participants' experiences with (mis)communication between school-home connections.

## KEY FINDINGS

Overall, online surveys and focus group interviews revealed multilingual families' views about the Head Start program's impact on their children's academic, social-emotional, and language development, socialization, and communication skills, as well as their beliefs about the program's ability to foster school-home communication, provide resources to families, facilitate program access and future program enrollment.

More than 93% of prospective families believe the Head Start Program would support their children's educational needs. Furthermore, 96% of families agreed or strongly agreed that the Head Start program would teach their children essential life skills. Focus group results reiterated these findings as current families expressed that the program had improved their children's academic skills. Families also cited a typical day's activities in their children's classroom, such as learning to write their names, playing with classmates, reading, and vocabulary acquisition, as factors in their children's academic development.

Results also revealed families' belief that the Head Start program supports their children's social and emotional development. Specifically, 93% of all the prospective families and 100% of families in the program strongly agreed or agreed that the program supports their children's social and emotional development. Additionally, during the focus group interviews, 75% of the families with children in the program expressed their satisfaction with the attention their children were receiving, especially in cases where children did not have siblings.

### Language Development

Of the families surveyed, 83% strongly agreed that the Head Start program supports their children's language needs. Another 17% were neutral in their response. Further, over 80% of the families agreed or strongly agreed that the Head Start program makes their children feel welcome and accepted. Focus group results showed that 75% of the families with children in the program believe the program supports their children's language needs. With bilingual teachers employed by the Head Start program and access to translator services, 100% of the families either strongly agreed or agreed that the staff makes them feel welcome.

### Social and Communication Skills

Families are also satisfied with the Head Start program's efforts in developing their children's social and communication skills. Social skills are the behaviors children acquire based on environmental cues that dictate how they engage with others (Takahashi et al., 2015). When children develop positive social skills, they enjoy positive relationships with others throughout their lives (Aksoy & Baran, 2010). Communication skills are those that facilitate children's ability to interact with others by conveying what they want to communicate in the ways in which they decide to communicate (Allen, 2017).

## School-Home Communication

Families believe that the Head Start staff seems interested in communicating with them. School-home communication is the ability of families to interact in two-way communication with school personnel about their children's educational development (Laho, 2019). The results show that 75% of the families with children in the program strongly agree that the Head Start program keeps them informed about their children's academic progress and school events. In addition, 47% of prospective families strongly agreed that they have easy access to the Head Start Program. The survey results also indicated that 77% of the prospective families agreed or strongly agreed that they could communicate with the Head Start Program. Of prospective families, 60% agreed that the Head Start program would encourage family communication. Focus group participants seemed satisfied with the Head Start program's methods to communicate with their families about their children's progress. Specifically, 65% of families with children in the program positively viewed communication between school and home, citing teacher outreach through conferences with families to discuss their children's academic progress as an example.

## Program-Provided Resources

While the Head Start program provides different resources to families, focus group participants felt the program should provide resources beyond academic, social, and emotional support, such as a mental health worker or psychologist. They would also like family training programs that teach English or computer literacy.

## Head Start Program Access

Focus group participants found the program to be easily accessible. Of this group, 80% of the prospective families and 86% of the families with children in the program found the location of the program to be convenient. Additionally, four out of the five families in focus group interviews agreed that the program was accessible. Families also expressed that they would make every effort to send their children to the program even if transportation was not provided.

Regarding immigration status, 90% of families from both categories (with/without children in the program) agreed or strongly agreed that their immigration status did not hinder their children's participation in the program. Overall, 43% of the families strongly agreed that the Head Start program would support the needs of their families.

## Future Enrollment and Recruitment

Prospective families responding to the survey strongly agree (43%) about their plan to enroll their children in the Head Start program. 75% strongly agree that they would send their children to the program. However, only four of the families in the focus group knew about the program. They stated that information was disseminated by word-of-mouth and by Comité de Padres (the Parent

Committee). However, one parent indicated that she had no knowledge of the Head Start program, but if she did, she would have enrolled her child in the program.

Most families strongly agreed or agreed that the Head Start program actively recruited families. For example, 20% strongly agreed, and 57% agreed that the program uses various resources to promote enrollment. During the focus group interview, all the families knew about the program except for one. Two families stated they knew about the program through the parent association in town. They agreed that the program could improve recruitment by sending flyers to all the households and making announcements to the entire town, similar to the emergency alerts used during a natural disaster.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored families' perceptions of multilingual early childhood programs and the partnership and communication process between multiple stakeholders. Results revealed that families felt a sense of partnership with the program and positively perceived communication between families and the Head Start program. Furthermore, families believed that the Head Start program supported their children's academic, social and emotional development, as well as their children's language identity. Also, families viewed the school and home partnerships as a vehicle for communication.

Overall, this study found that families positively perceive the Head Start program. Families who are not yet enrolled in the program want to have their children enrolled, while families who are already enrolled will continue to partner with the program. Families enrolled in the Head Start program felt that it supported their children's academic, social, and emotional development, language acquisition, and development and that there was a strong school-home partnership.

One of this study's limitations is that families who participated in the study were of two categories: Families with children in the Head Start program and prospective families who may enroll their children in the program. Focusing on two different family groupings led to split results. If families with children enrolled in the program or families without children in the program were invited to participate in two separate groups, program managers and leaders could strategically target programmatic efforts.

The results of this study also highlighted barriers to enrollment in the Head Start program. Although some families perceive that the Head Start program makes an effort to recruit families, more families expect the program to provide additional resources for future recruitment instead of conveying information by word-of-mouth. Therefore, it will be important that future research investigates the Head Start program's recruitment efforts, including how it communicates with families of children not yet enrolled, to strengthen access to resources and services supplied by the program to multilingual families.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A significant contribution of the study is its insight into how multilingual Spanish-speaking families in rural areas in the Southeast United States perceive Head Start programs. Future research could provide additional information about the program's stakeholders, including the perceptions of administrators and teachers on the impact and effectiveness of Head Start programs that serve multilingual families, examine the difference in perception between the program's view of its (mis)communication with families and how families view the degree to which they communicate with the program, explore the program's recruitment practices and enrollment efforts toward multilingual families in the community to better inform multilingual families about enrollment in early childhood education programs, investigate the role of the program's location and its connection to enrollment and multilingual family engagement, probe connections between enrollment and engagement in the Head Start program with students' success in kindergarten and first grade, and contribute to reducing disparities in academic achievement among children from multilingual families by increasing access to education at a young age.

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