

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Spanish-speaking Parent's Beliefs about Language

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In recognition of the increasing cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity among the early childhood population, knowledge about parents' beliefs concerning the way in which children learn has the potential to directly inform early childhood programs charged with the task of developing young children's language. This is an especially pressing need for the early childhood population of children from Latino, Spanish-speaking, low-income homes; Latinos are the nation's largest minority group and Latino children under the age of 6 represent one of the fastest growing segments of the population (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011), but overwhelmingly live in poverty. If we are to effectively serve this growing and academically vulnerable population, there is reason to develop a nuanced understanding of their parents' beliefs about the way in which children learn and develop language prior to children's formal school entry.

We administered a two-part interview to parents of 24- to 48-month-old Spanish-English bilingual children attending Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start (HS) collaborating programs in the Northeast U.S. (n = 200). The first part focused on aspirations about bilingualism and home language use, given that it is well-documented that patterns of Spanish language use vary from household-to-household (García & Frede, 2010). Parents were therefore first asked about the language(s) they hoped their child would speak as adults and they were then asked a series of questions related to their actual home language use practices. Specifically, four home language questions referenced talk directed *to the child* by the mothers, fathers, other adults in the home, and other children in the home while four home language output questions referenced the talk directed *by the child* to the mother, father, other adults in the home, and other children in the home. These questions were answered on a 5-point scale whereby 5 = only English, 4 = mostly English, 3 = equal amounts of English and Spanish, 2 = mostly Spanish, and 1 = only Spanish. The second part focused on parent beliefs about their children's learning and language development. This portion of the interview was adapted from questions from Johnston and Wong's (2002) survey of childrearing beliefs. However, we developed an additional set of questions about parental beliefs and values specifically related to children learning two languages. Parents were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements related to three

overarching categories as follows a) children's learning, b) children's language learning, and children's dual language learning. Each participant responded to a statement on a 5-point scale as follows: 1) Strongly Disagree, 2) Somewhat Disagree, 3) Not Sure, 4) Somewhat Agree, and 5) Strongly Agree. With this approach, we were able to examine potential differences in beliefs by patterns of reported home language use. Our key findings are outlined below.

KEY FINDINGS

A. Dual Language Development & Home Language Use

Aspirations about Children's Dual Language Development. Nearly all (97%) parents reported hoping that their child would grow up to be a Spanish-English bilingual and none said they hoped their child would grow up to speak only English. The most common reasons for wanting their children to be bilingual were so that they could maintain contact with their Spanish-speaking family members and because they believed bilingualism would afford their children more job opportunities.

Language Use Practices. Children in this sample were mostly spoken to in Spanish by their mothers and other adults in the home while fathers and other children in the home were closer to providing children with approximately equal amounts of English and Spanish language input. Similarly, children in this sample spoke mostly Spanish to their mothers and other adults in the home and also used approximately equal amounts of English and Spanish when speaking to their fathers and to other children in the home. In other words, there was a positive relation between the language directed to children at home by others and the language used by the children themselves when speaking others in their homes. We thus created an *overall home language use score* to examine potential differences in parents' beliefs about children's learning and language development.

B. Parent Beliefs

As previously described, we utilized a questionnaire comprised of numerous statements for parents to rate their levels of agreement. To capture the variability within each category in as few factors as possible, we conducted a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) for each of the 3 categories investigated (children's learning; language learning; dual language learning).

Beliefs about Children's Learning. Although there was considerable variation in parents' average levels of agreement with these statements, a three-factor solution was found (which explained cumulatively 50% of the total variance), as follows: *dependence* (this factor included items such as 'three-year-olds are too young to help with household chores'), *exploration* (this factor included items such as 'parents should let children experiment, even if they might make mistakes'), and *independence* (this factor included items such as 'Parents should wait until young children ask before giving help'). Further, parents who reported using more Spanish than English in the home were more likely to agree with the *dependence* factor.

Beliefs about Children’s Language Learning. Again, although there was considerable variation in parents’ average levels of agreement with these statements, a three-factor solution was found (which explained cumulatively 55% of the total variance), as follows: *active language use* (this factor included items such as ‘Parents should ask young children to repeat new words in order to help them learn to talk’), *social norms* (this factor included items such as ‘The proper titles for people (“Aunt” Sally) are more important to learn than the names of objects’), and *sophisticated language use* (this factor included items such as ‘If parents use “baby talk” (like “wawa” for water, or “jamies” for pajamas) their child won’t learn to speak well’). Further, parents who reported using more Spanish than English in the home were more likely to agree with the *social norms* factor.

Beliefs about Children’s Dual Language Learning. To an even greater extent than was the case with the first 2 categories, there was wider variation regarding the extent to which parents somewhat or strongly agreed with these statements. Here, a two-factor solution was found (which explained cumulatively 45% of the total variance), as follows: *no language mixing* (this factor included items such as ‘Children should be corrected when they mix two languages in the same sentence’) and *bilingual facility* (this factor included items such as ‘Young children can easily keep two languages separate and know which one to use in different situations’). Further, parents who reported using more Spanish than English in the home were more likely to agree with both factors.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Gaining insight into parents’ beliefs about children’s learning, in general, and language development, in particular, can help bridge children’s home and classroom experiences so that children’s learning opportunities are maximized. This is especially important for children who come from linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse homes; often, there is a difference between children’s learning experiences and opportunities at the home and in the classroom. The results of this study revealed that, within each of the three aspects of children’s language and learning studied (i.e., *Beliefs about Children’s Learning*; *Beliefs about Children’s Language Learning*, and *Beliefs about Children’s Dual Language Learning*), there was substantial variation among parents’ beliefs. In other words, the Spanish-speaking parents in the sample cannot be characterized as adhering to a common orientation about the way in which young children learn and develop language—there was not a general level of consensus among the sample studied. This is an important point to underscore because early childhood programs may erroneously assume that parents who share the same cultural, linguistic, and economic background—in this case, Latino, Spanish-speaking parents from low-income homes—tend to share similar beliefs about children’s learning and language development. Furthermore, we identified a relationship between parents’ beliefs and their reported home language use, such that parents who reported more Spanish than English use at home tended to be in greater agreement with many of the questions asked.

For example, within the *Beliefs about Children’s Learning*, the *dependence* factor was not surprising given past research documenting Latino parents’ strong sense of interdependence (e.g., Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997). We note that some work suggests that Latino, Spanish-speaking parents may be hesitant to enroll their children in early childhood programs because

they perceive them as too didactic and prefer more family-oriented, informal child care arrangements (e.g., Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Pierola, 1997). While results of our study do not speak directly to this issue, the fact that parents who reported more Spanish than English use tended to be in greater agreement with the *dependence* factor suggests that early childhood programs should attend to the extent to which the preschool is warm and inviting for parents and children. Similarly, within the *Beliefs about Children's Language Learning*, it was not surprising that the social norms factor emerged as important for all participating parents, especially those who reported using more Spanish than English at home given that the concept of respect has been found to be prevalent among Latino, Spanish-speaking families (e.g., Valdés, 1996). Indeed, to be respectful means deferring to those in positions of authority, which includes school personnel (e.g., teachers and administrators). Early childhood programs may lack knowledge of parents' values related to social norms and may inadvertently perpetuate a sense of a hierarchical relationship wherein the preschool staff is in a position of power compared to the families they serve. A simple strategy of encouraging parents to refer to the preschool staff by first name or, alternately, by referring to parents in the same formal manner for, example, may potentially foster an increased sense of shared values and respect with Spanish-speaking parents, ultimately promoting a sense of community and improving students' educational outcomes (e.g., Nieto, 1999).

Finally, and arguably the most unique contribution of this study, we probed parents' beliefs about *Children's Dual Language Learning*. There was no clear trend on this issue; some parents considered it important to avoid mixing Spanish and English, while others appeared convinced that children can easily negotiate two languages simultaneously.

Taken together, these findings offer important insights for early childhood programs serving children from dual language learning homes, in this case English and Spanish speakers, underscoring in particular the variability in parents' beliefs about young children's dual language learning. The research base is quite clear that bilingualism in itself is not a risk factor for low academic achievement (e.g., Snow, 1992), but it is clear that misconceptions about the process of dual language learning remain among the public (e.g., Espinosa, 2008). We agree with Lopez, Barrueco, Feinauer, and Miles (2007) that Latino, Spanish-speaking parents, such as those in our study, might benefit from increased knowledge about bilingual language development given the often confusing and unclear messages to which they are often exposed. Furthermore, early childhood educators might themselves benefit professional development on the topic because they generally do not have much training and/or coursework related to working with dual language learners (Alliance for a Better Community, 2012).

In conclusion, we note that the results reported here are restricted to this specific subset of the population (i.e., Spanish-speaking parents from low-income homes). Additionally, use of a questionnaire can provide a snapshot of parent beliefs, but naturalistic observations of parents' behaviors and interactions with their young children represent an important next step for researchers. Furthermore, although differences in parents' and early childhood educators' beliefs have been reported (Adair & Tobi, 2008), there is a need to further explore teachers' beliefs related to learning and language development, especially for dual language learners.

At the same time, given the achievement gaps documented between Latino, Spanish-speaking children and their peers prior to formal school entry, this study provides insight into the learning and language beliefs of the participating children's parents—insight that should be capitalized on by early childhood programs committed to advancing this population's overall achievement beginning in the preschool years. Indeed, within the sample of Spanish-speaking

parents studied, beliefs about the way in which young children learn and develop one or two languages vary widely.

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