

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

Development of a Culturally Responsive Book Reading Intervention for Latina Mothers and their Head Start Children

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Parents are encouraged to read books to their young children because of the impact book reading can have on later language and literacy development. However, few book-reading programs are designed for parents of culturally diverse backgrounds. The purpose of this article is to: (a) describe a book-reading intervention that was created for Latina mothers and their Head Start children, (b) provide an overview of the results, and (c) discuss the implications for teachers. In general, we found that the intervention had an effect on children's language abilities. Children who received the intervention used more vocabulary words and produced longer utterances in language samples than children who were in the control group. Participating mothers appreciated that the program allowed them to share their culture with their children as well as to learn how to use interactive book reading strategies. Implications for practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: book-reading; intervention; Latino; culture

The importance of reading books to children is well established. Book reading helps lay a foundation for children's later language and literacy abilities by building children's vocabulary, comprehension of language, and grammatical abilities (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Joannisse, Manis, Keating, & Seidenberg, 2000; Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002). To assist parents provide high quality book reading experiences for their children, interactive book reading (or dialogic reading) interventions have been developed. The goal of these interventions is to assist parents provide a rich language environment for their children by engaging their children in talk about books by: (a) asking open-ended questions, (b) modeling language for and providing supportive feedback to their children, and (c) scaffolding their children's language abilities (Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, Fischel, DeBaryshe, Valdez-Menchace & Caulfield, 1988).

Despite calls for culturally responsive interventions from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1995, 2009), few book-reading interventions have been tailored to Latino families and their children. The purposes of this article are to describe the

development of a culturally-responsive, interactive book-reading intervention for Latina mothers and their Head Start children, to give an overview of the results and to discuss the implications of the findings for teachers.

DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE BOOK-READING INTERVENTION

Madres educando a sus niños/Mothers Educating their Children, a culturally-responsive book-reading intervention, was designed to teach Latina mothers to use interactive book reading strategies to support their children's language development in Spanish and English. The intervention is implemented through a series of home visits that center around eight culturally-informed books that we designed specifically for this project (See Table 1).

We developed the books through an iterative process that included in-depth consultations with Latina Head Start mothers who lived in the community where the project occurred. First, we interviewed Latina mothers about their views and beliefs about parenting and about key facets of their culture that they wanted their children to learn. During the interviews, the mothers highlighted the importance of family, showing respect to others, particularly elders, being well mannered, and helping others in times of need. They also discussed the importance of festivals, family gatherings and the foods of their homeland. This information was then used to develop the themes for each book. We then teamed with an illustrator and author of children's books to create the series of books used in this intervention. A team of five mothers provided feedback on the initial content of the stories and illustrations. Their input was used to make revisions to each of the books. The mothers then reviewed the changes to the books to make certain that the books reflected their comments.

The books chronicle the experiences of the Alvarez family who travel back to their homeland to visit their grandmother and their extended family. During their travels, the family has experiences that highlight cultural values, traditions and events (See Table 1). Questions are included on various pages in each of the books which prompt mothers to talk with their children about the stories.

When implementing the intervention, bilingual home visitors from the families' communities conducted eight home visits that were scheduled approximately every two weeks. Home visitors used either Spanish and/or English during the visits, depending on the mothers' preferences. At the first home visit, the home visitors shared the importance of parents reading books to their children and discussed that talking to their children about books when reading would help their children get ready for school. During each of the home visits, the home visitors introduced a new book from the Alvarez series to the mothers. They shared the story that was contained in the book and then taught a targeted interactive book reading strategy to the mothers. These included: modeling language for children, asking questions of varying levels of difficulty and abstraction, providing verbal feedback to the child, and expanding upon what the child said. During the final three home visits, the home visitors also provided the mothers with commercially produced bilingual books with Post-it notes in them that prompted mothers to engage in dialogue with their children while reading. The purpose was to help the mothers generalize use of the interactive book reading strategies to other books beyond the stories about the Alvarez family. At the end of each home visit, the mothers were provided with activities to do with their children over the week. The activities included reading the targeted book to their

children using the new interactive language strategy, teaching vocabulary words related to the books, asking their children to retell the stories and/or telling their children stories about their childhood or family that were related to the theme of the book. These activities were reviewed at the beginning of the subsequent home visit. At each home visit, home visitors also gathered mothers’ feedback about the intervention, the books and activities.

TABLE 1
Culturally-Informed Books Developed for Madres educando a sus niños/Mothers Educating their Children

| Title of the Book | Theme |
|--|--|
| Un viaje a la casa de Abuela/A Trip to Abuela’s House | The Alvarez family takes a trip to their homeland to visit relatives. |
| Fiesta Patronales | The children learn about their culture at Fiesta Patronales. |
| Rosa aprende una lección/Rosa Learns a Lesson | One of the Alvarez children experiences a key lesson about respect. |
| Bobo y los pollos/Bobo and The Chickens | The Alvarez children find out about Bobo, a comic figure in the culture. |
| Hasta los piratas tienen vecinos/Even Pirates Have Neighbors | The Alvarez children experience how Latinos help each other in times of need. |
| Ir al río /Going to the River | The Alvarez family takes a weekend trip with their relatives and experiences the joy of family. |
| La flor y el colibrí /The Flower and the Hummingbird | The Alvarez children learn a traditional folktale and learn about their parents’ childhoods. |
| ¡Un viaje maravilloso!/A Wonderful Trip! | The Alvarez family returns home and talks about the marvelous visit they had with their relatives. |

AN INITIAL EVALUATION OF THE BOOK READING INTERVENTION

The Mothers and Their Children

Seventy-three Latina mothers and their preschool children from an urban Head Start program in central Pennsylvania completed our initial evaluation of *Madres educando a sus niños/Mothers Educating Their Children*. All mothers were native speakers of Spanish and all children were spoken to in Spanish and English by their mother, father or other family member (e.g., grandmother or grandfather). The majority of mothers were of Puerto Rican descent (81%). The other mothers were Dominican, Mexican, Cuban or Honduran. The children averaged 56 months of age, with half being girls. Sixty percent were born on the United States mainland. More than half of the children were in their second year of Head Start, where English was the language of instruction.

The Evaluation

The mothers were randomly assigned to either the intervention group or the control group. Mothers in the intervention group received the book reading intervention as described previously. Mothers in the control group received a series of four packets that contained math activities that targeted counting, shape recognition and naming, and pattern matching.

The language abilities of all children were evaluated before the intervention began and once it was completed. Children's vocabulary and language comprehension abilities were assessed in Spanish and English using the Picture Vocabulary and Oral Comprehension subtests of the Woodcock Test of Achievement III (in English; Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001) and Bateria III (in Spanish; Muñoz-Sandoval, Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2005). Also, the children's conceptual vocabularies were assessed using the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test: Spanish-Bilingual Edition (EOWPVT-SE; Brownell, 2001). The test allows children to answer in Spanish or English to obtain a global measure of children's vocabularies in Spanish and English.

Additionally, language samples were elicited from the children as they told a story while looking at a wordless picture book (narrative task) and while their mother read a book to them. The mothers and children were asked to speak in the language that was most comfortable for them. Language samples were transcribed verbatim and coded and analyzed using the Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT; Miller & Iglesias, 2012) for two linguistic variables: (a) mean length of utterance (MLU-W) in words – MLU is well-established as a valid measure of syntactic abilities and (b) number of different words (NDW) – a measure of expressive vocabulary.

INITIAL PROMISE OF THE INTERVENTION

Overall, our findings show that this culturally responsive intervention has promise for increasing children's language abilities and that families view the intervention as being socially and culturally meaningful. In particular, we found that children who received the intervention, *Madres educando a sus niños/Mothers Educating Their Children*, made significantly greater increases in their expressive language abilities than children in the control group. Specifically, children who received the intervention increased their expressive vocabularies (i.e., NDW) and increased the average length of their utterances (i.e., MLU-W) more than children who did not receive the intervention. The increased length of the utterances means that the children's sentences and questions were becoming more grammatically complex. We did not observe differences in children's language abilities as measured by standardized tests. This is not unexpected given that this was a relatively short intervention.

Additionally, participating mothers found the intervention to be socially and culturally valid. All mothers stated that they tried to use the target interactive language strategies and that the strategies helped their children think more about the books. A number of mothers said that other family members, including fathers and grandparents, read the books to the children first in Spanish and then again in English.

A large majority (65%) of the mothers spoke about the value of the books and how the books allowed them to share their culture with their children. One mother spontaneously commented on how the books served as a bonding experience between her child and his father.

Several of the mothers commented that the stories in the books reminded them about facets of their culture that they have forgotten. Additionally, half of the mothers discussed that their children greatly enjoyed the books and shared the stories with others in the family and their teachers. Also, several mothers commented that their children's teachers noticed a change in the children's interest in books.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

This project has two important implications for educators. First, the project demonstrates the value of incorporating books and materials into classrooms that reflect the cultures of the children and families they serve. When we were first beginning the project, we bought a variety of books and educational materials that reflected Latino cultures to our team of mothers. The mothers gave us valuable feedback about which materials truly spoke to them and reflected their culture. They helped us identify songs and poems that we could use for our supplemental activities as well as helped inform us of books and materials best reflected their culture.

It would be highly possible for teachers in Head Start and other early childhood centers to create teams of parents who could provide them with input about books, songs, poems, materials and activities that could be incorporated into the classroom. This would help integrate all children's cultures into the children's educational experiences. The team could meet periodically to provide input, and teachers could gradually integrate more and more culturally relevant books, materials and activities into their classrooms over the year. In addition, the parent team could collect culturally relevant materials for use in the classroom. For example, they could contribute photos of their homeland and/or cultural events that could be used to create books for the classroom or for sequencing activities where children retell a story based on a cultural event that occurred at home or in their community. The team could also help develop and/or carryout culturally relevant activities, such as simple art projects or cooking activities, in the classroom. Photos could be taken of the children engaging in the activities, and books could be made for use in the classroom. Alternatively, programs could host family nights during which parental input is gathered and/or materials were made for use in classrooms.

The second implication of the project is that Latina mothers are very interested in learning and using interactive book reading strategies to promote their children's language development in Spanish and English and to prepare their children for kindergarten. Educators could capitalize on this interest by conducting a series of trainings for parents at their centers/schools, during home visits or during family nights. During these trainings, teachers could model how to read interactively with children, with an emphasis on asking open-ended questions, modeling language of children, expanding upon children's responses, and engaging children in conversations about the books. Educators could then create a lending library and/or make culturally relevant books (as described above) and send books home with the children. Sticky notes or Post-it notes could be placed on various pages of the books that provide parents with example questions and prompts that they could use to engage children in conversations about the stories.

Through these efforts, relationships between teachers and families would be strengthened. In addition, teachers would obtain valuable input from parents about books, materials and activities for their classrooms. Such activities could increase parental involvement in the program as well as make the classrooms more culturally inclusive.

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