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Linguistic services and parental involvement among Latinos: A help or hindrance to involvement?



Michael D. Nino*

Department of Sociology, University of North Texas, TX, USA

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ABSTRACT

Despite being one of the most consistent predictors of achievement among youth, parental involvement among Latinos continues to be low. In an attempt to increase involvement among Latinos, schools have implemented programs that provide linguistic services for parents who face language and cultural barriers. In order to understand the effectiveness of these programs, a subset of data are used from the National Survey of Latinos: Education to examine the relationship between four linguistic services and parental involvement. Results demonstrate linguistic services play only a marginal role in parental involvement among Latinos, and in some instances, even decrease involvement. Consequently, there is minimal support for programs that provide linguistic services to Latino parents in schools, suggesting policymakers should revisit the impact these services have on the Latino parent community.

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1. Introduction

Parental involvement has become one of the most salient topics regarding youth academic achievement. Over the last four decades scholarship consistently finds parental involvement to have considerable positive effects on the education and overall wellbeing of youth (Jeynes, 2003a; Spera, 2005; U.S. Center for Education and Statistics, 1966). Attempts to increase parental involvement have been met with bipartisan political support (Mattingly, Prislín, McKenzie, Rodríguez, & Kayzar, 2002). At the national level, parental involvement was included as a core component of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Schools receiving Title I funding are now required to spend a portion of allocated monies on parental involve-

ment programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). With the increase in parental involvement programs throughout the United States, scholars have become increasingly interested in their effectiveness (Epstein, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Jeynes, 2003a, 2005a, 2011; Mattingly et al., 2002; White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992). To date, however, most have not adequately examined the role school services geared toward Latino parents has on involvement.

As of 2009, the number of Latinos enrolled in public schools exceeded 11 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011a, 2011b), and in states like California (Demographics Unit, California Department of Education, 2011) and Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2011), Latinos now make up the numerical majority of students enrolled in public schools. Although Latinos have a substantial presence in public schools, many struggle to overcome a number of structural, cultural, and linguistic barriers when entering their respective schools, resulting in lower levels of school readiness and academic achievement when compared to white children (Fry, 2010; National Center for

* Correspondence to: Department of Sociology, University of North Texas, 1155 Union Circle No. 311157, Denton, TX 76203-1157, USA. Tel.: +1 806 831 7048; fax: +1 940 369 7035.

E-mail addresses: michael.nino@unt.edu, micknino7@gmail.com

Education Statistics, 2011a, 2011b). In an attempt to close the achievement gap, school districts have implemented new policies designed to foster parent–school relationships among Latino parents, especially among those who are not English proficient. These new initiatives are based on a growing recognition that a substantial portion of Latino parents are unable to effectively communicate with school faculty and staff, creating barriers between the school and some Latino parents.

The present study examines the effect of four types of linguistic services designed to increase parental involvement among 636 Latino parents of children from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Data are drawn from a subset of the National Survey of Latinos: Education; Pew Hispanic Center/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and a nationally representative sample of 3421 adults, 18 years of age and older. The results of this study contribute to the current body of literature regarding Latino parent involvement by demonstrating the effect different types of linguistic services have on involvement; furthermore, the results provide particularly relevant information to policymakers and administrators tasked with finding effective ways to increase involvement among this ethnic group.

2. Parental involvement programs

The effectiveness of parental involvement programs has been the subject of considerable debate. On the one hand, findings suggest there is little to no evidence to support the assertion that parental involvement programs increase student academic achievement, parent–teacher relationships, and student behavior (Mattingly et al., 2002; White et al., 1992). On the other hand, a number of scholars find evidence that parental involvement programs are directly related to youth academic success (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). In recent years, meta-analyses demonstrate that programs designed to increase involvement among parents are linked to academic achievement (Jeynes, 2003a, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2011). In the most comprehensive meta-analysis to date, Jeynes (2012) finds programs which emphasize specific aspects of parental involvement, such as shared reading among parents and children, parents checking homework, and communication between parents and teachers have positive effects on the academic achievement of youth.

2.1. Linguistic services for linguistically isolated parents

For Latinos, programs designed to increase parental involvement often focus on linguistic services. In the United States, Spanish is the largest non-English language spoken, comprised of approximately 9.2 million households, of which 2.3 million are considered linguistically isolated (Statistical Research Division, U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Studies also find first generation Latinos reside in ethnic enclaves that delay learning English (Ravuri, 2014). Not surprisingly, a number of Latino children also experience language barriers when entering their respective schools. As of 2009, almost 2 million Latino students reported having difficulty speaking English (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2011a, 2011b). Programs designed to address problems associated with linguistic barriers provide Spanish dominant parents with services such as report cards and test results written in Spanish, as well as bilingual teachers and school officials to discuss a child's performance. These programs often receive federal support, thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB Act). In Title I, Part A of the NCLB Act, monies have been allocated to close the achievement gap among disadvantaged and minority students with an emphasis on parental involvement in education.

3. Latinos and parental involvement

In general, parental involvement is linked to a number of positive academic outcomes, including higher grade point averages (Gutman & Midgley, 2000), better school attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), fewer retention and special education placements (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999), higher levels of social skills (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004), and fewer discipline problems (Deslandes & Royer, 1997) when compared to children with parents less involved. The link between parental involvement and academic achievement can also vary across different groups, especially among ethnic minorities (Jeynes, 2003b). In a meta-analysis examining the impact of parental involvement among minorities, Jeynes (2011) demonstrates that more subtle aspects of parental involvement benefited Latino and African American children more than Asian American youth, providing contemporary evidence suggesting parental involvement does play a meaningful role in the academic achievement of some minority groups.

Despite indications that minority parents care about their children's academic achievement and want to be involved in their schooling (Trumbell, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001), a number of studies demonstrate that ethnic minority parents, with the exception of Asians, are less involved in their children's education (McNeal, 1999). Among Latinos, low involvement is often associated with structural and linguistic factors such as recency of immigration, linguistic isolation, and low levels of education and income (Shin, 2004). Latino parents also find school environments unwelcoming, discouraging and view invitations to participate in school functions as criticism of their parenting style (Inger, 1992; Tinkler, 2002).

The observation of low parental involvement among Latinos may also be the result of traditional operational definitions of parental involvement, a broad construct used to describe a multitude of parent behaviors. Researchers have developed a variety of operational measures of involvement, which remain inconsistent (Fan & Chen, 2001). Moreover, research examining parental involvement among Latinos, along with other minority groups, focus mostly on school-based involvement (Shah, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009) and disregard home-based involvement, which can distort the true nature of parental involvement among Latinos (Altschul, 2011; Jeynes, 2010). Although Latinos experience marginalization in school-based settings, Latino parents, especially second generation

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