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Home-school literacy experiences of Latino preschoolers: Does continuity predict positive child outcomes?

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ABSTRACT

The current study explored the literacy practices used by primary caregivers and Head Start teachers of low-income Latino children, examined the extent to which these practices are continuous, and investigated the role of continuity in home-school literacy practices on Latino preschoolers' emergent literacy development. Results showed that *continuity* in home-school global literacy practices, as well as in the use of high-challenging talk during book sharing interactions, was predictive of children's emergent literacy skills at the end of the Head Start year. By contrast, *discontinuity* in home-school book sharing styles led to higher emergent literacy outcomes. Results are discussed in relation to the importance of the home and preschool environments in supporting low-income Latino children's early literacy development.

As the largest minority group in the United States, Latinos comprise more than 16% of the total U.S. population (García & Jensen, 2009; National Research Council, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), and the Latino population is rapidly growing, such that by 2100, 33% of the U.S. population will be from Latino backgrounds (National Research Council, 2006; Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002). Latinos in the United States, however, do not belong to one homogeneous group; instead, there is much diversity in Latino cultural heritage and practices (Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Nevertheless, there is an array of pan-ethnic issues faced by large percentages of Latino children in the United States (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). For example, Latino preschoolers are more likely to live in poverty than are preschoolers from other cultural and ethnic groups (Espinosa, Laffey, & Whittaker, 2006), with 61% of Latino children coming from low-income backgrounds (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2008). This, in turn, has a negative impact on the type of schools Latino children attend (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Already at school entry, Latino children lag behind their peers on measures of school readiness (Chernoff, Flanagan, McPhee, & Park, 2007; Espinosa et al., 2006; Lee & Burkham, 2002), in particular emergent literacy (Páez, Tabors, & López, 2007), and the gap in academic achievement only grows over time (Planty et al., 2008), with Latinos facing lower high school graduation rates than their non-Latino peers (Rumberger & Anguiano, 2004).

Policy-makers in the United States are, thus, faced with a growing concern about the development of school readiness skills and academic achievement among Latino children (Pew Hispanic Research Center, 2005). The preschool years are a critical period for the development of the early language, print, and literacy skills that are predictive of children's reading readiness and overall school success (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). In fact, research has consistently demonstrated that adult–child interactions in both the home and preschool settings provide the context for emergent literacy development, laying the foundation of literacy-related knowledge prior to children's entry into formal schooling (e.g., Phillips & Lonigan, 2005; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). For example, through their interactions with adults, preschoolers learn to engage in extended discourse independently (Blum-Kulka & Huck-Taglicht, 2001), a skill that is critical for their literacy development upon school entry (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Griffin, Hemphill, Camp, & Wolf, 2004; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Surprisingly, though, only a handful of studies have explored the home and classroom early literacy environments of low-income Latino children. As understanding the home and school emergent literacy experiences of low-income Latino children is critical to our knowledge of the unique experiences of this growing population of children, the current study addressed this gap in the research by exploring how Latino children's experiences at home and at preschool jointly contribute to their development of emergent literacy skills.

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Continuity in home-school practices: conflicting theoretical frameworks

Focusing on the social–interactional function of language, sociocultural theory views literacy as a cultural practice, such that children learn culturally appropriate literacy uses and practices based on their everyday interactions with adults and more knowledgeable others (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). Given the centrality of the home and school settings during the early childhood years, researchers have suggested that similarities of beliefs and consistency in practices (i.e., continuity) across both settings are critical for positive child outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Accordingly, researchers have suggested that the early literacy difficulties prevalent among children from non-mainstream communities might result from a mismatch between home and school language and literacy practices (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001; Heath, 1983; Perry, Kay, & Brown, 2007). In her seminal ethnographic work, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) posited that because the education system in the United States is grounded in middle-class European–American practices, the home and school language experiences of children from middle-class families are continuous (or similar) in nature. For example, middle-class European–American mothers tend to engage their children in classroom-like question–answer routines. By contrast, for children from non-mainstream communities there often exists a lack of continuity – or discontinuity – between home and school language and literacy practices. Through close study of the everyday lives of working-class children and their families in three Carolina communities, Heath highlighted stark differences between the language and literacy socialization practices fostered in the home and classroom settings. Black children from working-class homes, for example, were not read to regularly and had limited exposure to print. Furthermore, the children were not seen by the adults in their community as conversational partners, nor were they asked questions that elicited basic information such as labels of objects — a practice that is routinely found in school settings.

Heath (1983) suggested that teachers' lack of knowledge about the unique culture-specific practices of these working-class families might lead to misunderstandings about children's skills and, thus, be detrimental for their later success in school. As a result, although parents in the communities Heath studied valued education, many of their children experienced failure upon school entry. Although past research has not extended Heath's work to explore preschool-aged children in Latino communities, it seems plausible that a similar mismatch might exist between the home and school practices of Latino children, especially for those from immigrant families. For example, unlike mainstream European American parents, Latino parents tend to adopt a sole narrator style when engaging in shared book reading interactions with their preschoolers, such that they provide the majority of the information to their children (Caspe, 2009; Melzi & Caspe, 2005; Melzi, Schick, & Kennedy, 2011). This is in stark contrast to the book sharing styles typical of preschool classrooms, where teachers tend to elicit information from the children, thereby co-constructing the stories with their class (Dickinson, 2001; Dickinson & Smith, 1994). Moreover, although Latino parents value education, they emphasize *educación* at home, as they strive to raise good, moral, respectful children, as being well-mannered is seen a key component of school success (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). By contrast to the expectations of teachers in U.S. schools, however, they do not see emergent literacy as an integral early childhood milestone, or as a critical precursor to becoming literate, and do not believe that it is the parents' responsibility to engage children in early literacy practices (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). Thus, a clear difference exists between U.S. Latino children's caregivers' and teachers' beliefs and practices.

A lack of match between home and school practices might mean that children enter school without a clear understanding of classroom expectations (Barbarin, Downer, Odom, & Head, 2010). As a result, teachers' understanding of the language and cultural backgrounds of the children in their classrooms is essential (Espinosa & López, 2007; Heath, 1983; Moll, 1992). By building on home and community literacy practices, teachers can work toward establishing continuity between home-school practices, which, in turn, is a critical precursor to children's academic success (Heath, 1983). In other words, by establishing continuity, children's early school failure might be avoided.

Nevertheless, attributing the early school failure of children from non-mainstream communities, such as low-income Latino children, to the discontinuity of home-school practices might be overly simplistic. In fact, some scholars (e.g., Hemphill & Snow, 1996; Phillips, McNaughton, & MacDonald, 2004) argue that across all groups – mainstream and non-mainstream – there always exists some degree of discontinuity between home-school practices, as a result of variations in the contexts. For example, by contrast to the home, where mothers typically engage in conversation with one child at a time, in school children must learn to interact in a larger group setting. Thus, these researchers ascribe to a co-constructivist view of development, whereby children actively construct knowledge through their interactions with others, both at home and in the larger community (McNaughton, 2001). Moreover, it is possible that some degree of discontinuity is, in actuality, advantageous to young learners, as it allows for exposure to a multiplicity of literacy styles and genres (Hemphill & Snow, 1996). This would suggest then, for example, that, for low-income Latino preschoolers, experiencing an array of language and literacy practices through interactions with caregivers at home and at preschool could place them at an advantage, insofar as their discourse skills, as well as their flexibility in thinking. This might explain why, irrespective of potential discontinuity between home-school language practices, not all Latino children experience school failure (Reese & Goldenberg, 2008). Furthermore, there exists the possibility that a mismatch between home and school practices might be beneficial for children, such that one setting might serve to compensate for a lack of exposure to particular stimuli in the other. In other words, for some children, and perhaps especially for those from low-income backgrounds, experiencing some discontinuity between home and school practices might, in fact, serve as a protective factor (Barbarin et al., 2010). Yet, research on the continuity between home and school practices has failed to explore this possibility fully through quantitative analyses.

Although there remains a dearth of empirical evidence about the role of continuity between home and school practices in predicting children's school success, both perspectives maintain that all children enter school with a wealth of cultural resources intended to help them participate – and succeed – in the classroom environment (McNaughton, 2001). These cultural pathways influence home practices and activities, which serve as essential predictors of children's development. Ultimately, though, both the home and school contexts are integral to children's development.

Home and school practices as predictors of child outcomes: methodological limitations

To date, most research exploring preschoolers' emergent literacy development has focused on the integral role of the home environment or the preschool setting. For example, past work has linked numerous aspects of the home environment, such as the availability of children's books and other forms of print, opportunities to engage in extended conversations, and adult–child book sharing interactions, to young children's development of language and emergent literacy skills (e.g., Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Bus, van IJzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Caspe, 2009; Haden, Reese, & Fivush, 1996; Lonigan, Shanahan, & Cunningham, 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Similarly, various aspects of the preschool classroom environment, including pre-literacy instruction and the frequency and form of book reading interactions, have been found to help shape children's literacy development (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Dickinson & Porche, 2011; NICHD, 2005; Wasik, Bond, & Hindman, 2006). Nevertheless, these