Bilingual Latin@ children's exposure to language and literacy practices through older siblings in immigrant families

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines language and literacy practices in nine Latin@ immigrant families, focusing on young children (ages 4–6) and their older siblings (ages 7–10). Audio, video, and fieldnote data were collected during a series of in-home observations. We use a multifaceted theoretical framework integrating sociocultural notions of learning and scaffolding, communities of practice, and syncretic literacy. Analysis reveals that the language and literacy practices around which siblings engaged – including narrating real or imaginary events, sharing word knowledge, translating, and reading and writing – allowed older siblings to both act as models and enact their expertise alongside younger children. Older siblings' expertise spanned both languages but was not monolithic; it played important roles in the school preparation of young bilingual children, though in ways that are more complex and contradictory than are emphasized in much research on sibling influence.

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On a warm spring evening, five-year old Vanesa and her eight-year old sister Fabiola sit on their sofa, crayons and paper splayed out in front of them. Their mother, who moved to the United States 12 years ago from Honduras after partially completing secondary schooling there, uses Spanish and some English with her children at home. Vanesa has already drawn a flower, and is working to label her creation. She asks, "*hermana* ('sister'), how do you spell flower?"

Siblings around the world participate in such everyday encounters. As daughters of immigrant parents, children like Vanessa and Fabiola live in multilingual, multicultural worlds in which syncretism, which Volk (2013) calls "young children's negotiated re-creation of cultural practices in a process of creativity and transformation" (p. 237), is a way of life. Alim and Paris (2015) argue that such practices benefit youth: "the linguistic and cultural flexibility of many children of color ideally positions them for success in a diversifying, globalizing world" (p. 80). Similarly, Zentella (2005) contends that the language practices of Latin@ families and communities are a source of strength for children themselves and society in general.

At the same time, however, educational discourse in the US often focuses on a so-called "language gap," in which children in families with low socioeconomic status (and often in communities of color) are argued to know fewer words at certain developmental points and therefore have impoverished language skills and greater likelihood of later educational failure. Hart and Risley (1995) are best known for their work on this topic, in which they argued that by age three, children from families on welfare are exposed to approximately 30 million fewer words than those from affluent homes. Their work has been subsequently criticized on both methodological and conceptual grounds, but research and educational interventions in the "language gap" tradition have become increasingly prominent.

Several critiques of this work are particularly relevant to the current study and merit further explanation. Linguistic anthropologists have faulted the "language gap" perspective for focusing solely on parents, and mothers especially, thereby excluding other family members (like siblings) and ignoring other language resources in the home. Such perspectives, they argue, also ignore the sophistication of all language groups (including the complex metalinguistic and translanguaging skills typical of bi/multi-linguals) and focus on single words rather than the complexity of language in use. As a result, these discourses entrench deficit orientations toward

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minoritized communities, underestimate the need for complex solutions to issues of economic inequality, and reduce complex socialization practices to matters of discrete word knowledge (Avineri et al., 2015).

Such debates have important implications for Latin@ immigrant children, who represent an increasing proportion of children in U.S. schools. While the U.S. Latin@ population is extremely diverse, a certain subset of this group, Spanish-speaking children from immigrant families with limited economic resources or expertise in U.S. schooling are often seen having "language gaps" upon entering school that hinder their educational success. Further complicating these issues, parents from non-dominant communities are often marginalized by schools through restrictive notions of "parent involvement" (Baquedano-López, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013) and language and literacy (Heath, 1983). Classroom environments are also a concern: international research suggests children in poverty actually have fewer opportunities to learn once at school (Schmidt, Burroughs, Zoido, & Houang, 2015), furthering educational access and equity concerns.

For these reasons, sibling interactions and socialization to school literacies can have particularly powerful effects by providing home-based opportunities for young children to learn school-valued language and literacy practices. Due to their first-hand experiences in such contexts, older siblings may be especially well equipped to provide access to "dominant cultural competence" valued in schools (Paris, 2012, p. 15). At the same time, there are significant tensions in these sibling interactions: importing school-based monolingual practices and related hegemonic ideologies, as well as possibly reductive or decontextualized reading and writing skills, can work against the richness of multilingual resources in Latin@ immigrant homes.

This study focuses on nine Latin@ immigrant families with young children at the beginning of their schooling careers (ages 4–6) and older siblings (ages 7–10). We aim to identify the kinds of modeled or enacted interactions between siblings that have the potential to foster younger siblings' language and literacy development in immigrant Latin@ families, as well as opportunities and challenges brought forth through those interactions. (In our study, we consider "modeled" practices to be those engaged in by the older sibling and simply observed by the younger sibling. "Enacted" practices are those in which the older and younger siblings engaged together.) In doing so, we bring together a multi-dimensional view of immigrant families – as sites of learning through social interaction, as dynamic communities of practice, and as sites of syncretic practice – to help explore siblings' profound influence on language and literacy practices within Latin@ immigrant homes that may impact younger sibling's linguistic and academic development. In addition to this theoretical complexity, this paper also makes a unique contribution to analyzing ways in which not only reading/writing but also oral language skills are developed through sibling interactions in immigrant Latin@ families, an as-yet underexplored area of research.

1. Literature review

1.1. Defining language and literacy practices valued in schools

Discussions of early elementary school children's language and literacy development have been significantly shaped by the findings of the National Early Literacy Panel Report (2008), which define "conventional literacy skills" as decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing, and spelling (p. vii). Further, they found 11 "early" or "precursor" skills to be predictive of later development, including alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters/digits and objects/colors,

writing or name writing, phonological memory, concepts about print, print knowledge, reading readiness, oral language, and visual processing. While noting the potential usefulness of these skills, Orellana and D'warte (2010) have suggested that such an approach is limited in that it excludes many important and productive literacy practices of linguistic and cultural minority children. Based on a range of existing sociocultural research, they argue that children who regularly cross "linguistic and cultural borders" for themselves and others develop "transcultural" skills and dispositions, such as a "*breadth* and *flexibility* of linguistic expertise: the ability to adapt *how* one speaks, reads, and writes in different contexts and relationships and for different purposes, as well as the critical language awareness that may come from grappling with this kind of decision making" (p. 297, emphasis in original). Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, and Meza's (2003) examination of connections between bilingual children's out-of-school translating/interpreting and their abilities to paraphrase or summarize school-based texts, as well as Dorner, Orellana, and Li-Grining's (2007) analysis of improved reading standardized test scores for student who language-broker for family members, suggest the nature of these transcultural literacy skills and the inherent complexity of defining school-valued language and literacy practices for culturally and linguistically diverse children.

In our description of "language and literacy practices" throughout the remainder of this article, we make a concerted attempt to reframe these practices according to Orellana and D'warte's (2010) recommendations: we explicitly include transcultural skills and dispositions alongside language and literacy skills defined by the National Early Literacy Report. These are just two of many frameworks, but their synthesis of research from distinct traditions is useful in moving beyond deficit-oriented "language gap" discourses that are often applied to immigrant Latin@ families.

1.2. Older siblings' roles in language development

Sibling interactions expose young children to norms for communication and conversation, a trend found across linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Howe, Petrakos, Rinaldi, & LeFebvre, 2005; Rabain-Jamin, 2001). When looking at sibling pretend play among English-speaking children living in Canada, for example, Howe et al. (2005) discovered that children with older siblings were more advanced than first-born children in their abilities to understand and extend their playmates' ideas and create shared meaning, and in their abilities to use conversational maintenance behaviors such as negotiation.

One recognizable way that older siblings contribute to their younger siblings' language development is through linguistic and cognitive scaffolding (Howe et al., 2005; Volk, 1999). Often, scaffolding takes the form of prompting or giving direct feedback regarding linguistic behavior, as is evident in both monolingual (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993; Dunn & Shatz, 1989; Rabain-Jamin, 2001) and multilingual (Bhimji, 2006; Nilep, 2009) families. For example, older siblings may initiate conversation topics in a manner that prompts younger children to enter into the dialog (Rabain-Jamin, 2001). Similarly, if younger children struggle to understand either the content or relevance of a conversation, older siblings may assist by providing explanations (Azmitia & Hesser, 1993; Howe et al., 2005; Rabain-Jamin, 2001; Zukow, 1989). For example, in Zukow's (1989) studies of sibling interactions amongst monolingual children in Mexico, older siblings verbally and non-verbally directed younger siblings' attention to important elements, provided missing information, and foregrounded alternatives to help clarify messages, a process achieved by breaking down and then "rechaining" information (pp. 96–97). Lastly, older siblings often assume instructive roles through ratification or rejection of linguistic behavior (Bhimji, 2006; Dunn & Shatz, 1989; Nilep, 2009; Smith,