

Families and Educators Supporting Bilingualism in Early Childhood

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Abstract

This article explores the strategies that three Latino families in the U.S. employed in raising their children bilingually in Spanish and English. It also looks at their rationale for bilingualism as well as the challenges the parents failed to anticipate in implementing their strategies. The data were gleaned from comparative case studies over a three year period. The families wanted their children to be bilingual because they believed in the cognitive and economic advantages of bilingualism and that bilingualism would help maintain the families' roots. To maintain the native language, the families planned to speak and support the Spanish language at home and relegated the teaching of English to the school. While two of the families expressed concerns about their children not being proficient in English by the time they entered school, only one of the families anticipated some of the challenges that their daughter would face in learning and maintaining Spanish. In fact, the results of the study indicated that attaining productive bilingualism (the ability to speak the minority language) presented the three young girls with more difficulties than being proficient in English. Recommendations for parents and schools are provided.

Key Words: bilingualism, early childhood education, educators, Latino parents

Introduction

Early bilingualism is understood as the acquisition and development of two languages (L1 and L2) in a child's preschool years, either simultaneously or

sequentially. Three categories of factors impact the ability to speak two languages: the individual, the family, and society. Some of the individual factors are the learner's personality, gender, motivation, and intellectual ability, as well as age at exposure to two languages and birth order, among others. The family's language proficiency and use of L1 and L2, socioeconomic status, and the parents' attitude toward bilingualism also affect the acquisition of two languages. Finally, acquiring two languages occurs in a societal context that expresses attitudes toward the minority and majority languages, determines the status of bilingualism, and affects the level of support for the majority and minority languages in the school and the community (Iglesias & Rojas, 2012; McLaughlin, 1984).

Achieving productive bilingualism in early childhood (the ability to speak both L1 and L2) versus passive bilingualism (the ability to understand L1 but only speak L2) requires attention to the child's and family's needs as well as involving the child's early childhood teachers and the community in supporting them both. This article is a contribution to the literature that examines the role of the parents in promoting the development of early childhood bilingualism and the challenges that they face. It proposes that overcoming the many obstacles that parents encounter in pursuing bilingualism for their young children necessitates the involvement and collaboration of parents and educators in the context of the community.

Literature Review

The literature on early bilingualism that informs this study includes the advantages of bilingualism, the parents' rationale for promoting early bilingualism, the strategies they use for raising their children bilingually, and the difficulties that they face based on the children's and their family's characteristics as well as society's support or lack thereof for young children's minority language. Extensive research suggests that there are advantages at being bilingual at an early age, including: cognitive flexibility, metalinguistic awareness, and executive functioning skills (Genesee, 2008; Lauchland, Parisi, & Fadda, 2012; Poulin-Dubois, Blaye, Coutya, & Bialystok, 2011; Yoshida, 2008). Other research focuses on understanding why an increasing number of minority and majority parents choose to educate their children bilingually. These studies suggest that parents value the academic, social, and economic advantages of bilingualism (Caldas, 2006; Chumak-Horbatsch, 2008; Guardado, 2011; Kennedy & Romo, 2013; King & Fogle, 2006; Park & Sarkar, 2007). There is additional research that also emphasizes that some families promote bilingualism as a way of maintaining the family's heritage and culture (Kennedy & Romo, 2013; Park & Sarkar, 2007; Reyes, 2011; Schecter, Sharten-Taboada, & Bayley, 1996; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006).

Further research examines the strategies that parents employ to raise their children bilingually, the role of the family in attaining the goal, as well as the challenges that they face in attaining their goal. The research examines what Schwartz, Moin, and Leikin (2011) called internal strategies that are performed at home and external strategies that support the minority language in the community. The reviewed research relevant for this study examines parents' effort to support the Russian language in Israel (Schwartz et al., 2011); Chinese (Zhang, 2010), German (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009), French (Caldas, 2006), and Spanish (Kennedy & Romo, 2013; Reyes, 2011) in the United States; and Korean (Park & Sarkar, 2007) and Spanish (Guardado, 2011) in Canada. The primary internal strategy of all these parents was to enforce using the minority language at home. Some parents used the "one person—one language" strategy which meant that at least one caretaker spoke the minority language at home (Caldas, 2006; DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; King & Fogle, 2006). In other cases, the minority language was the only language spoken at home (Guardado, 2011; Kennedy & Romo, 2013; Zhang, 2010). Other ways of supporting the minority language at home highlighted in these studies were the use of audiotapes, videotapes, children's books, vocabulary books, television, and use of the Internet to connect with family members in the country of origin (Caldas, 2006; Guardado, 2011; Kennedy & Romo, 2013; Zhang, 2010). In some studies the families' strategies changed over time due to changes in the linguistic characteristics of the family and the community. According to Kennedy and Romo (2013), the success of the changes in strategies was contingent upon the conscious, deliberate, and sustained exposure to the minority language by also including older siblings and the extended family in an effort to help the children understand the importance of being bilingual.

External strategies implemented by parents in these studies include the support of the minority language in a bilingual program at a daycare, school, or afterschool program (Caldas, 2006; Chumak-Horbatsch, 2008; DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; Guardado, 2011; Kennedy & Romo, 2013; Reyes, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2011); church and other activities available in the community; spending time in the country of origin; and living in communities in which the minority language is easily accessible. The main strategy to support the majority language was to send their children to a monolingual school or a bilingual program (Caldas, 2006; Kennedy & Romo, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011; Zhang, 2010).

Despite the parents' best intentions, strategies can be difficult to implement due to obstacles at home and in society. The literature identifies at least five main obstacles at home: (1) providing enough input in the minority language, especially once children learn the majority language (Caldas, 2006; Chumak-

Horbatsch, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011); (2) convincing the children of the need to use the minority language (Caldas, 2006; DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009); (3) the tendency of younger siblings to speak with older siblings in the majority language (Caldas, 2006; Shin, 2002); (4) parents' concerns about bilingualism because they believe it leads to language delay, the mixing of languages, and the inability to speak either language well (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011); and (5) parental unawareness of the difficulty of attaining productive bilingualism (Kennedy & Romo, 2013; King & Fogle, 2006).

The literature on this topic also investigates the role of society in promoting bilingualism and suggests that the high status of English leads to a lack of support for bilingualism in the schools of many English-speaking countries (Potowski, 2011; Potowski & Rothman, 2011; Valdés, 2011). For example, in the United States bilingualism in early childhood has been supported by early childhood organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; 1996), the Office of Head Start (2008), and the Division of Early Childhood (2010) of the Council for Exceptional Children on the grounds that maintaining the native language has a positive impact on both the learning of English and the children's overall academic outcomes. However, despite the efforts of these organizations to educate early childhood teachers, administrators, and parents about the negative emotional, social, and academic consequences of losing the home language, society still expects that parents will assume the main responsibility for teaching their children the home language. As a result, teachers may acknowledge that these children speak a language other than English at home, but, in general, teachers very seldom support it in school (Guardado, 2011; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Armstrong de Almeida, 2006; Reyes, 2011).

This article examined the experiences and the challenges of three Latino families in raising their young children bilingually in Spanish and English from the perspective of the parents and the other family members involved in attaining the goal of bilingualism and supporting the efforts of the three young girls.

Theoretical Framework

Language socialization theory guided this study. This theory highlights the role of social environments—parents and other caregivers—in socializing children into one or more languages and through language(s) into the values, beliefs, and culture of the group (Zentella, 2005). Thus, children are socialized through language into linguistic groups and cultures. Recently, research in neuroscience confirms that social interaction is essential when babies are learning a foreign language (Kuhl, 2007). Babies learn a foreign language only when they interact face-to-face with native speakers; they do not respond to the same

information available through video or audiotapes (Kuhl, 2007). According to language socialization theory, the fact that the parents in this study are very motivated and expect their children to become bilingual will dictate the way they socialize their children into two languages and the culture of the group of which they are a part.

Method

This article is based on an ethnographic study that explored the ways in which three young Latino girls living in the New York City (NYC) metropolitan area became bilingual in English and Spanish. The study involved participant observation, audiotaping of the children's language interactions, and interviewing all members of each family (Rodríguez, 2010). This article explores the rationales and the strategies for promoting bilingualism that the parents used to guide those interactions and the subsequent challenges that they faced. The following questions guided the research: (1) What were the rationales of the families in considering bilingualism for their children? (2) What strategies did they plan to use to socialize their children into two languages? (3) What were the perceived challenges that the families anticipated in accomplishing their goal? (4) What were the actual challenges suggested by the data?

The researcher has extensive experience with bilingualism, having been born and raised in Spain, a country with several official languages, and being thoroughly proficient in English and Spanish. Professionally, she was a teacher in Spain and then in the U.S. where she taught in a bilingual program in the New York City public school system. This experience was an eye opener in terms of understanding how bilingualism was regarded in this country and the challenges children face in maintaining their native language.

Characteristics of the Families

Three families who expressed interest in raising their children bilingually and had children between 15 months and 3 years of age were recruited. The researcher knew one of the families from a previous study, met the mother of another participant family through an informal conversation in a community setting, and met the final participant family through a friend.

All of the families knew the goals of the study and were selected because of their commitment to educating their children bilingually; this commitment the researcher also shared. All families had at least one or more family members who were bilingual. They differed in terms of the parents' level of education and socioeconomic status. The researcher spoke the language used in each of the homes which was most often Spanish but sometimes English.

At the beginning of the study, the three participants—Josefina Cortés, Kayla Jiménez, and Thais Velázquez (all names are pseudonyms chosen by the families)—were 16 months, 15 months, and 30 months old, respectively. Josefina lived with her mother, father, and her 11-year-old brother. Josefina's mother was fluent in Spanish and understood and spoke some English. Her brother and father were bilingual. Mr. Cortés had a bachelor's degree, but his work was not connected to his education. Mrs. Cortés had a high school diploma and worked as a home attendant.

Kayla's family included her mother and father and her 4-year-old sister. Kayla's mother and sister spoke both English and Spanish; the father spoke only English. Mr. and Mrs. Jiménez each held a bachelor's degree and worked in education. Kayla was taken care of by her great-grandmother who was fluent in Spanish and spoke some English.

Thais lived with her mother and two teenage brothers. Mrs. Velázquez finished the eleventh grade. She worked as part of a welfare program. Thais's mother spoke Spanish and understood some English. Thais's brothers were fluent in English and Spanish. The distinct patterns of language interaction in English and Spanish in the three families are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

This article is mainly based on the semi-structured interviews conducted with all members of each family (except for Kayla's father) over a 2- to 3-year period in which the researcher visited the families for a total of between 40 to 70 hours each. However, informal data such as anecdotal conversations related to the study questions were included as a way to triangulate the data from the interviews. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish except for the interview with Mrs. Jiménez and Kayla's older sister that was conducted in English and Spanish. The prompts used in the interviews were based on the first three research questions listed above.

The data included transcripts of all the recorded audiotapes made during participant observation in each of the homes, including the interviews with each of the three mothers, a great-grandmother, and all the siblings in each of the households. The data for each of the families were stored in separate files in order to be analyzed as three different case studies.

Table 1. Patterns of Language Interaction in the Three Families

	Language Used in the Three Families	Language Used with the Three Participants	Language Used by the Three Participants
Josefina Cortés	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦Spanish was the language used in everyday conversation among the four members of the family. ♦The family watched TV in both English and Spanish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦At home she was addressed in Spanish. ♦She watched cartoons in English 3 hours a day, mostly alone. ♦At age 2½ she went to a daycare where she was addressed in English at her mother's request. ♦At home English was used to teach Josefina the numbers, letters, greetings, and manners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦At age 3 years 6 months Josefina understood English and Spanish. ♦She initiated most of her conversations in English and spoke in Spanish only when prompted. ♦She could say some letters, shapes, and colors only in English, and some numbers in English and Spanish.
Kayla Jiménez	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦English was the language used in everyday conversations at home. ♦Spanish was the language used in the great-grandmother's home; she has been caring for Kayla since she was 10 months old. ♦Mother watched the news in Spanish and talked to her daughters in Spanish to reprimand and comfort them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦She was addressed in Spanish at her great-grandmother's home where she spent about 8 hours a day. ♦She watched TV mostly in English, but her great-grandmother watched TV only in Spanish. Kayla watched <i>Dora the Explorer</i> in Spanish on Saturdays. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦At age 3 years 6 months Kayla understood English and Spanish but spoke mostly English and only a few words in Spanish.
Thais Velázquez	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦Spanish was the language used in everyday conversation among the four members of the family. ♦Mrs. Velázquez watched TV in Spanish most of the time. ♦Thais' siblings talked to each other mostly in English. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦Until the age of 3, Thais was addressed in Spanish by all members of her family, the extended family, and friends. ♦After age 3 her brothers addressed her in English often. ♦Thais watched some English TV programs since age 2. Since age 4 she mostly watched TV programs in English. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦At 3 years of age Thais understood English but spoke Spanish and a few words in English. ♦At age 5 she started school and was placed in a monolingual English classroom because she passed the Language Assessment Battery that the Department of Education administered to all Latino children who speak Spanish at home.

The interview transcriptions were coded and analyzed following the “template for coding a case study using a multiple case study approach” suggested by Creswell (2013, p. 209). In the first stage the researcher identified emergent themes for each of the case studies. The second stage involved organizing the data according to the emerging themes which were also tied to the research questions. The third stage involved comparing and contrasting the data of each case study for each theme in order to identify similarities and differences across the three case studies. The final stage aimed at looking at key factors and relationships among them that may contribute to the understanding of the families’ perspectives, as well as generating conclusions regarding why the parents wanted their children to be bilingual, the strategies they used, and the challenges that they faced. Understanding the “larger meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 187) involved looking at the researcher’s interpretation of the data in this study and connecting it to the literature on early bilingualism.

This is an exploratory study. The results cannot be generalized to other Latino families who educate their children bilingually because of the small number of participant families, how they were selected, and the fact that the three participant children are girls and the youngest in their families.

Results

Families’ Rationale for Considering Bilingualism for Their Children and Their Understanding of How to Achieve Their Goals

This section presents, in their own words, each family’s motivations for raising their children bilingually as well as their approaches for the successful fostering of Spanish and English fluency.

The Cortés Family’s Rationale and Strategies for Promoting Bilingualism

Mr. and Mrs. Cortés and their son said that it was very important for Josefina to be bilingual. Mr. Cortés emphasized the important role that being bilingual played in keeping their roots and that being bilingual had cognitive advantages. He said, “Para mí es muy importante que dominen los dos idiomas para que tengan sus raíces y porque se desenvuelven mejor.” [For me it’s very important that they (his two children) are proficient in the two languages to keep their roots and to make a better life.] He elaborated on this idea and said that a child with a Hispanic last name should speak Spanish to maintain his or her roots. Mr. Cortés added, “Yo he leído que personas que hablan dos o más idiomas tienen el poder de desenvolvimiento más fácil que una persona que hable un solo idioma, por eso para mí es muy importante que dominen los dos idiomas. [I read that people who speak two or more languages do better in life

than a person who speaks only one language; that is why it is very important for them (his two children) to be fluent in both languages.]

Josefina's brother said that it is good to speak Spanish because when he goes to the Dominican Republic people understand him, and he can also speak with his grandmother who does not speak English. Mrs. Cortés also highlighted the fact that Josefina's maternal grandfather and paternal grandmother did not speak English and that she wanted her children to be able to communicate with their grandparents.

Mr. and Mrs. Cortés expressed that the way for Josefina to learn English and Spanish was to use Spanish at home and English in school. As Mrs. Cortés said, "En la escuela ellos aprenden inglés automáticamente, y por eso es que nosotros tratamos de enseñarle español aquí en la casa para que también tengan sus raíces." [In school they learn English automatically, and that is why we try to teach her Spanish at home, for her to keep her roots.]

Mr. Cortés said that he did not foresee any problems for his children to learn both languages. He said, "Ellos son niños aprendiendo ahora, esa es la mejor fase cuando eres niño, que todo lo captan rápido y para ellos todo es fácil, no como cuando uno es adulto, no creo que haya ningún inconveniente, no creo que haya ninguna barrera para que aprendan los dos idiomas fácilmente." [They are children learning, and this is the best time; when you are a child you absorb everything fast, and for them everything is easy, contrary to what happens when you are an adult. I don't think there is any problem, I don't think there is any obstacle for the children to learn two languages easily.]

Mrs. Cortés, however, was concerned about Josefina's opportunity to learn English. As a result, she told the researcher that although there was a teacher who spoke Spanish at the daycare, she had requested that her daughter be addressed only in English. She thought that Josefina would learn Spanish at home, but would need input in English in the daycare in order to learn English before attending school.

The Jiménez Family's Rationale and Strategies for Promoting Bilingualism

Mr. and Mrs. Jiménez said that it was important to them that their daughters be bilingual; in fact, they were adamant about this for Kayla. Mr. Jiménez, who is not bilingual, was as interested as his wife in making sure that Kayla was as proficient in English and Spanish as Mrs. Jiménez and their first-born daughter. The Jiménezes pointed out that bilingualism would give Kayla an edge later on when she looks for a job.

Mrs. Jiménez's grandmother explained that when her children were young, there were very few children who spoke Spanish, and her children ended up speaking English among themselves, but that she had always taught her

children to be proud of who they were. She said, “Lo que yo les he enseñado a los hijos míos que estén orgullosos de lo que son, no acomplejarse porque uno es puertorriqueño.” [What I always taught my children was to be proud of who they were; don’t feel bad because you are Puerto Rican.]

In the Jiménez’s home the plan to attain bilingualism was that the great-grandmother, who took care of Kayla for eight hours a day, and Kayla’s mother and sister would speak Spanish at home. Also Mrs. Jiménez was looking for a bilingual daycare that would provide Kayla with services in Spanish and English. Mr. Jiménez accepted his family being part of the study in part because he thought that the researcher would also provide input in Spanish.

At the end of the study Mrs. Jiménez concluded that Kayla’s level of proficiency in Spanish was not the same as her eldest daughter. Kayla understood Spanish but was not able to express herself in Spanish the way her sister could. She said this was due to a combination of the following factors: (1) Mrs. Jiménez did not find a good, affordable, bilingual early childhood program that she could send Kayla to as she had done with her older daughter; (2) she did not have a plan regarding the use of Spanish at home—she was using Spanish and English indiscriminately; however, she always used Spanish to comfort and discipline her daughters—a fact she was not aware of until her husband pointed it out to her; (3) Mrs. Jiménez’s grandmother knew some English which she used with Kayla—she did not consistently provide input in Spanish. Mrs. Jiménez told the researcher, “Eventually I will have to talk in Spanish because I want it [Kayla to be proficient in Spanish]; that is important to me as well as my husband.” She also pointed out that it was more difficult to enlist her older daughter in speaking Spanish with Kayla because she does not see the point in speaking Spanish to her sister if she speaks English.

The Velázquez Family’s Rationale and Strategies for Promoting Bilingualism

For Mrs. Velázquez, making sure that her daughter was fluent in Spanish was essential because she did not speak English. Mrs. Velázquez said, “Yo no hablo inglés; tiene que hablar español conmigo.” [I don’t speak English; she has to speak Spanish with me.] In addition she expressed her interest in her being biliterate, too, as were her older brothers who attended a bilingual program and had spent some time in the Dominican Republic. Thais’s brothers, both bilingual and biliterate, expressed the same idea: “In school they speak to her in English; over here we speak to her in Spanish because my Mom doesn’t know English; she has to speak Spanish. She doesn’t have to forget Spanish; she has to speak two languages.”

Thais’s brothers supported the idea of addressing their sister in Spanish at home until Thais turned three, and then there was talk of her going to school. Mrs. Velázquez asked her sons to talk to Thais in English, too. The two

brothers decided that one would talk to her in English and the other in Spanish, but they said that they both ended up talking in English to her. One of the brothers thought that Thais should go to school being able to speak English; he expressed this idea this way: “Now most parents teach their kids English, so if she goes to school only speaking Spanish, she is like an outcast.” The other brother, however, thought that many teachers spoke Spanish and that speaking Spanish would not be a big problem.

Thais’s brothers were happy and proud to be bilingual. One of them said, “It’s more like, speaking two languages, you can speak to a lot of people; plus when you go to work, you get a job, you get more money because you speak two languages; that is the positive thing.” The other brother said that “it is a special thing to speak two languages because not everybody can do it.”

For Mrs. Velázquez, Spanish would be the language used at home, and Thais would also attend a bilingual program to learn reading and writing in Spanish. However, when she started kindergarten she was tested in English and placed in a monolingual classroom. Mrs. Velázquez told the researcher that she had requested a bilingual classroom but was told that there wasn’t any more space, and given that Kayla had passed “the Language Assessment Battery,” her daughter needed to be in an English monolingual classroom.

Mrs. Velázquez recognized that, unlike her older children, when Thais went to school she spoke English, but she suggested that Thais mostly learned English by watching cartoons on TV and socializing with the babysitter’s grandchildren, who understood some Spanish but spoke only English. She said, “Ella aprendió inglés le voy a decir con la televisión y con los nietos de María, la niñera. Los nietos de María y la televisión porque ella no mas vivía sentada y todo lo que decían en los muñequitos, ella lo iba repitiendo todo.” [She learned English, I am telling you, watching television and with Maria’s grandchildren. With Maria’s grandchildren and with the television because she spent lot of time watching cartoons, and she repeated everything that was said.]

Although the parents assumed that their children would become bilingual if they were addressed in Spanish at home and in English at school, in fact, the three families expressed their interest in enrolling their daughters in bilingual programs without any success. The Jiménez family could not find a high quality bilingual daycare program in their neighborhood. Mrs. Velázquez could not enroll her daughter in a bilingual program because Thais was already fluent in English. Mr. Cortés told the researcher that he would send his daughter to a bilingual program but that none were available in his neighborhood. This shows the lack of support that these families encountered in the community, within a city in which the majority of the population speaks a language other than English at home.

Anticipated Challenges Expressed by the Families Versus Challenges Revealed by the Data

This section presents both the challenges each family shared with the researcher regarding their children's bilingualism and the challenges that were not apparent to family members but could be inferred from the data.

Challenges Anticipated and Faced by the Cortés Family

Mr. and Mrs. Cortés expected their children to be fluent in Spanish and English. They were surprised when, at the end of the study, they noticed that Josefina answered questions in English when she was addressed in Spanish, showing that she understood Spanish but did not feel as comfortable speaking Spanish as speaking English. Mrs. Cortés was, at some point in the study, concerned about her daughter not being able to speak English, but she never expressed the thought that the challenge for her daughter would be to speak Spanish fluently.

The plan that the family had for speaking Spanish at home and English in school did not work because, before Josefina turned three and when she was not yet fully fluent in Spanish, she attended a daycare at which, following her mother's advice, she was addressed only in English. She was usually in the daycare from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Therefore, the input in English was much more intense, compounded by the fact that when she was at home she also watched English TV programs, and it was easy for her to interact with her brother in English.

Challenges Anticipated and Faced by the Jiménez Family

Mrs. Jiménez did not anticipate Kayla's difficulty in learning Spanish. She had the experience of her older daughter being able to express herself in Spanish, and she thought that this would naturally happen for Kayla, too. By the middle of the study, however, she identified the difficulties that Kayla faced which her older sister had not. Mrs. Jiménez was not able to find a bilingual daycare center that she liked and could afford and, according to her, that was the determining factor in Kayla's inability to speak Spanish. However, just as important, she also explained that she did not have a plan to speak Spanish to Kayla as systematically as she had done with her older daughter.

The other factor that contributed to the problem was that the other two Spanish speakers in the household, Kayla's sister and her great-grandmother, did not provide the input expected. Kayla's sister did not talk to her in Spanish because, as she said, "Why should I talk to her (Kayla) in Spanish if she speaks English?" She told her father, when he insisted on her speaking Spanish, "I speak Spanish when somebody does not understand me and I have to help."

Also, the great-grandmother spoke some English, and therefore Kayla did not need to speak Spanish to communicate with her.

Challenges Anticipated and Faced by the Velázquez Family

Mrs. Velázquez assumed that Thais would be fluent in Spanish, but she was concerned about Thais reaching proficiency in English by the time she would attend school. The mother agreed that when Thais started kindergarten at 5 years of age she was fluent in Spanish and spoke some English. Mrs. Velázquez was relieved when she realized that Thais was fluent in English, too. However, she thought that Thais had learned English with the babysitter's grandchildren, who understood Spanish but could not speak the language, and also by watching TV. She did not give credit to her teenage children who also provided English input to Thais at home.

Despite the English input provided at home since Thais was about 3 years old, she always had consistent input in Spanish because that was the only way for Mrs. Velázquez to effectively communicate with her daughter. This certainly had an impact in Thais's fluency in Spanish.

At the onset of the study all the parents expected their children to be able to speak Spanish and English. Only Mrs. Velázquez expressed an interest in her daughter being literate in English and Spanish. In the case of the Cortés and the Velázquez families they took for granted that their children would learn Spanish at home and English in school. However, by the time they were talking about Josefina and Thais going to school, they expressed concerns regarding the children's opportunities to learn English and considered being fluent in English a priority before attending school. In the case of the Jiménez family there was never a doubt about Kayla speaking English, the issue was to provide enough input in Spanish for her to speak Spanish.

Discussion

This study reveals, first, the rationale for bilingualism from the perspective of three Latino parents; second, the role of the family in developing early bilingualism; and third, the challenges the families faced. The parents in this study, like other parents highlighted in research, were aware of the social, emotional, cognitive, and economic advantages of bilingualism (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; Kennedy & Romo, 2013; King & Fogle, 2006; Schecter et al., 1996; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006). Secondly, they felt that preserving their language was necessary to building their children's Latino identities (Guardado, 2011; Kennedy & Romo, 2013; Reyes, 2011; Schecter et al., 1996). Unlike other successful parents, however, the parents in this study did not verbally communicate to their children why it was important to speak Spanish.

Parents in this study, as in virtually all the literature reviewed on early bilingualism, assumed the responsibility for transmitting their language to their children (De Houwer, 2007; Guardado, 2011; King & Fogle, 2006). To that end they planned to speak Spanish at home and relegated their children's exposure to English to the school. Although the parents did not express any difficulties in completing this task, in fact, the three families enlisted the support of the community by trying to enroll their children in bilingual programs. However, high quality bilingual programs were not available in their neighborhood or were only available for children who did not speak English. The immediate consequence was that they did not have ways of responding to the two main difficulties encountered: providing enough input in Spanish, and motivating the children to speak the native language at home (Chumak-Horbatsch, 2008; DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; Guardado, 2011).

The parents assumed that it would be easy to provide enough input in Spanish at home to maintain the minority language because in two of the three households, every family member was fluent in Spanish. However, once the young children became fluent in English, the parents could not prevent their children from speaking it at home with their older siblings who, although they were bilingual, were more inclined to speak English than Spanish. For example, Mr. Cortés was surprised that Josefina answered in English when he and the researcher addressed her in Spanish. He could not understand why Josefina would not speak Spanish because he was not aware of the extent of the English input provided in the daycare and then again at home.

In addition, the parents did seem to understand the impact of society's pressure on children and parents alike to master English as soon as possible, which explains the parents' tendency to worry more about their children learning English than Spanish. In fact, two of the families expressed their worry about their children not being fluent in English before starting school because they thought that it would compromise their academic development and professional opportunities (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008; Potowski & Rothman, 2011). Only the monolingual (English-speaking) father realized that his daughter would have difficulties learning Spanish.

In the end, in the U.S., English is the majority language connected to prestige, power, and success. Spanish is the minority language linked to undocumented immigrants who are seen negatively in society. English is not only the majority language in the U.S., but it is also considered the international language of business, technology, and science—the language that you need to succeed not only in the U.S., but in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is difficult for parents and children to invest in acquiring Spanish, the language spoken at home (Potowski & Rothman, 2011; Spolsky, 2004).

Overcoming these obstacles requires the involvement and collaboration of parents and educators in the context of the community. Parents and early childhood teachers alike need to be educated on issues of bilingualism, including: the complex and lengthy process involved in bilingual language development in early childhood; the positive impact of productive bilingualism in the academic success of language minority students, amply documented in the literature (García et al., 2008); and how the culture of monolingualism is embedded in our everyday lives through the media, educational institutions, and language policy in the U.S. (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Armstrong de Almeida, 2006; Wiley, 2011). A better understanding of both the advantages of maintaining the minority language and the difficulties involved in reaching bilingualism may propel parents and educators to be persistent, to use other resources in addition to speaking the native language at home, and to collaborate in attaining the common goal of bilingualism.

Suggestions to Promote Bilingualism

Educators and parents can support the minority language in the school by pushing for programs that aim at promoting bilingualism for minority language children and mainstream families. When this is not possible, early childhood centers should display a positive attitude toward the choices of language minority families by acknowledging, accepting, respecting, and promoting not only English but their native language, as well (NAEYC, 1995). This can be accomplished by using approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom that capitalize on the language and culture of all the children, by teachers encouraging parents and other family members to speak the minority language at home at all times, by hiring personnel that are bilingual, by encouraging all personnel in the schools who are proficient in a language other than English to speak it in school for other purposes than just translation, and by providing parents with information regarding afterschool programs that promote the minority language in the community.

Parents can enlist the support of the extended family by using the Internet to communicate with family members in their country of origin, by regularly interacting with extended family members who speak the minority language and live nearby, and by visiting the home country or receiving visits from relatives who live in the home country (Valdés, 2011). In addition, parents at home and educators in the classroom can teach young children lullabies, songs, poems, stories, dances, and games in their native language; they can also use tools especially appealing to children such as the Internet, music, videogames, audiotapes, and TV programs in their native language (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009; Guardado, 2011; Kennedy & Romo, 2013). These strategies would

send the message to young children that speaking the native language is important because it allows for interaction with extended family members (e.g., grandparents) and is valued by important people in their lives, including teachers, even if they live in a society that sees itself as monolingual (Kennedy & Romo, 2013).

Collaboration between parents and institutions of education is also needed to start challenging the current language policy that stresses the acquisition of English to the detriment of minority languages. A “comprehensive national language policy” is called for that considers minority languages as human resources and therefore promotes their maintenance (Wiley, 2011). This approach to educating language minority students will start addressing the needs of school-age English language learners who experience academic failure in part because they are not given the support and time to learn two languages (Gándara & Rumberger, 2009; García et al., 2008).

Research has an important role to play in understanding how to educate children bilingually. The literature on bilingualism indicates that parents are an essential but not always sufficient ingredient in raising children bilingually. More research is needed to better understand the frequency, quality, and patterns of parental input that facilitate successful bilingualism; the role that children play in acquiring two languages; and ways to move children from understanding the minority language to speaking it (De Houwer, 2007).

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