

English language learners and literacy development

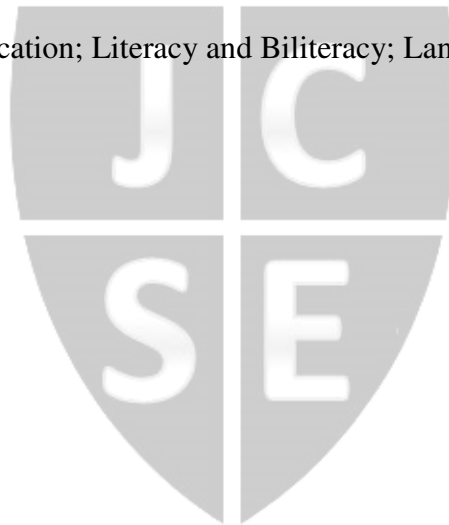
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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper was to review the literature on factors that support English Language Learners (ELLs) literacy development in early childhood classrooms. Vygotsky's (1968) Sociocultural and Sociohistorical theories were the framework guiding this research. The findings include the importance of using ELLs social and cultural background for literacy development. At the early childhood stage children are being socialized and culturally incorporated into their families and communities, which are the 'funds of knowledge' students, bring to school. Implications for educators are included.

Keyword(s): Latinos and Education; Literacy and Bilinguality; Language; Culture; Sociocultural contexts



INTRODUCTION

Historically, the education of Latino students appears to be resistant to change, even as research indicates that the use of a student's native language is important for literacy development (August & Hakuta, 1997). The US education system and programs models for English Language Learners (ELLs) continue to focus on teaching primarily in English (Brisk, 2006). Research in bilingual education, linguistics and English as a Second Language (ESL) since the 1960s has shown support and evidence to support the use of a student native language to promote the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) which increases student academic knowledge and skills (August & Hakuta, 1997; Brisk, 2006; Cummins, 2000).

Subtractive bilingual education practices (Crawford, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999) continue to plague our education system for ELLs. Results of research show that students need to be taught in their native language using their social and cultural backgrounds to help students with literacy development. De La Luz Reyes (2001) suggested that children who enter school as biliterate seldom get a chance to continue in the development of biliteracy as the main goal in bilingual education programs in the US as ELLs are transitioned into mainstream English academic settings. According to Donato (1997), "Schooling of Mexican Americans during the first half of the 20th century in the southwest functioned as a means of social control, an attempt to socialize them into loyal and disciplined workers, and the instrument by which social relations between Mexican and white communities were reproduced." (cited in Hálcon & De La Luz Reyes, 2001, p.12).

George I. Sanchez (1934), a pioneering Chicano psychologist, challenged deficit perspectives of bilingual students. Studies have indicated the need for teachers to understand that building on the knowledge, cultural and linguistic assets of students is the foundation for learning (Moll and Hálcon, 2001, p. 66-67). Deficit theories or perspectives place the 'blame' on students' lack of academic achievement within the individual, their family, community, culture and language. These theories have held the longest currency in our education system (Flores, 2005; Valencia, 2010, 1997b).

According to Donato (1997) by the 1930s, 85% of Mexican-American children were forced to attend segregated public schools in the U.S. southwest (as cited in Hálcon, 2001, pg. 67). Hálcon and De La Luz Reyes (2001) have pointed out that the sociocultural and sociohistorical backgrounds of children are the backbone for acquiring literacy and biliteracy. With this perspective, educators play a vital role in child development and learning. The teacher becomes the mediator and their role becomes one of advocating for all children; this includes valuing what students bring school: their culture and language (Brisk, 2006; Darder, 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992).

PURPOSE

The main purpose of this paper was to review the literature related to factors that support English Language Learners' (ELLs) literacy development in early childhood classrooms. Understanding a child's social and cultural background along with how early literacy skills are learned/acquired leads to better understand the foundation for academic success. The following research question guides this study/investigation:

- 1) What factors support English Language Learners' literacy development in early childhood classrooms?

SIGNIFICANCE

Literacy and biliteracy development is the foundation for children's learning in school. Educators need to understand that children come to school with social and cultural knowledge. This knowledge may not be transparent being that educators may have a preconceived notion that families and communities have deficits (Valencia, 2007). Educators may fail to link instruction to students' home life, local community, and family. Historically, Bilingual programs have not provided sufficient support for the ELLs in the classroom (Brisk, 2006). The focus has been on developing English rather than providing a support in the students first language. Teachers are one of the most important factors in children's literacy development at school. Children who are in Early Exit bilingual programs are more likely to have difficulty in their literacy development. Students may not receive enough support to help them transition into a mainstream classroom. According to Cummins (2000), the language of instruction should be learned parallel to the first language to be successful (p. 57). In Early Exit Bilingual program classrooms the focus is on learning English as quickly as possible while providing minimal support for the native language. Early exit programs continue the historical treatment of ELLs by viewing bilingualism as a "problem" (Ruiz, 1984; Wright, 2010). By not fostering instructional programs to support the native language, Hálcon (2001) claims that students were being socialized to become disciplined workers in society. Maintaining the status quo or hegemonic practices (Darder, 2012). The practice of assimilating non-English speaking children at the cost of losing their first language cannot be ignored. Devaluing a child's language and culture is considered subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of research will focus on the factors that support literacy/biliteracy development for ELLs. Moll (2001) stated that Vygotsky's sociocultural framework indicates that "The general theoretical premise is that higher psychological functions originate in human sociocultural activities" (p. 14). This research used Vygotsky's, (1978), Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as theorized by Moll (2001), as a theoretical base. The concept of mediated meaning the direct relationship between the person and their cultural background or what they bring with them and how they use their cultural background in their social community provided the frame.

Moll, (2001), suggested utilizing Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory as way to mediate between students cultural setting to facilitate learning. Teachers must use the diversity in their classrooms as a resource to help plan lessons and experiences that are meaningful to the students. Researchers, (Diaz and Flores, 2001; Houtchens, 2001; Moll, 2001; and Newman, 2010), found that using the funds of knowledge or the knowledge that students arrive at school with as the focus for planning lessons which will lead to meaningful learning experiences.

Brief History of Latinos in U.S.

It is important to acknowledge the history of Latinos along with the importance of literacy, biliteracy, and sociocultural theory. Moll, (2001) and Hálcon (2001) state that by the 1930's Latino/a students were attending segregated school. Bilingual education has been a controversial topic for a number of years. In the 1920s and 1930s Intelligence tests (IQ tests) were given to Spanish speaking students in English, a language they were not familiar with which then placed them in remedial and segregated special education programs (Yzquierdo Mclean, 1995).

According to Donato (1997), "Schooling of Mexican Americans during the first half of the 20th century in the southwest functioned as a means of social control, an attempt to socialize them into loyal and disciplined workers, and the instrument by which social relations between Mexican and White communities were reproduced" (cited in Hálcon and De La Luz Reyes, 2001, p. 12). In other words the education of Mexican Americans in the southwest was problematic for teachers, policy makers and the education system. Latinos students were segregated in schools. Valencia (1997a) stated that "These IQ tests purportedly showed that Spanish speakers failed to achieve academically because they were: (1) non-English speakers, (2) culturally deprived, (3) mentally retarded, (4) bilingual (5) poor, or (6) not interested in learning" (cited in Hálcon, 2001, 65-66).

Accordingly, bilingual children were being segregated into separate classrooms and or schools. Psychologist George I. Sanchez challenged the use of the IQ tests as early as 1934, but he was dismissed and considered radical and irrelevant. Sanchez found that studies indicated the need for teachers to understand that building on the knowledge, cultural and linguistic, of the children is the foundation for learning.

Today the education for Latino students remains controversial as educators and policymakers promote the focus of teaching of and in English (e.g. NCLB). Bilingual education research shows a need for students to be taught in their native language using their social and cultural backgrounds to help the children with literacy development (Brisk, 2006; Pérez, 2004).

The practice has been to "assimilate" the Spanish speaking children at the cost of losing their Spanish. "This is evident today on two fronts: the general public's antipathy toward the education of Mexicano/Latino as manifested in the initiative process in California, and the resistance of classroom teachers to accepting literacy instruction in languages other than English." Hálcon (2001, p. 70). Acknowledging the sociocultural nature of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) is, in fact, a vehicle for higher-order skills (i.e., critical literacy)." (Hálcon, 2001, p. 75).

Literacy

Schools may use the National Literacy Panel (NLP) as a foundation for developing their literacy practices and programs at the campus level. Several authors in a special issue of *Educational Researcher* (Aug/July 2010) took the annual National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) report and examined the findings to reveal and summarize the research in what is considered success in early literacy development and practices. As early literacy is playing a bigger role in early childhood education and it is being inspected more closely it is important to examine every part of this report. The *Educational Researcher* report reinforces the importance of understanding early literacy and how parents and families can help children develop literacy.

According to Pearson and Hiebert (2010) “It is genuinely useful to know that the five programmatic initiatives (of NELP) – namely, code-focused instruction, shared reading interventions, parent and home programs, preschool and Kindergarten programs, and language enhancement interventions – all make consistent difference in profiles of student achievement on outcomes that we value as indicators of reading competence” (p. 287).

The bottom line was that any type of intervention helps the children in the long run. The clearer the focus is on a specific skill the better the results may be. Neuman (2010) indicated that the “NELP discovered that alphabet knowledge (code), phonological awareness (code), phonological memory (code), writing one’s own name (code), and rapid naming of letters (code) were the strongest predictors of later measures of literacy development” (p. 301). These literacy practices had an impact on improving literacy for early childhood learners when they are presented at an early age.

With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 came the birth of Reading First initiative. The Reading First initiative report found that many schools had changed their way of implementing their literacy instruction but it had little effect on the impact on student success. The report found that teaching Phonemic Awareness in K-1, phonics first and fast, comprehension strategies through explicit instruction, vocabulary through a range of approaches, and fluency through oral reading practices (Pearson & Hiebert, 2010, p. 287) had not provided a change on student academic success.

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For ELLs, schools with early exit bilingual programs initially waited to introduce content areas until the students had ‘mastered’ English (Wright, 2010). The same was true for biliteracy practices, in that children were not introduced to another language until they have mastered their first language (Cummins, 1979; María De la Luz Reyes, 1992). Cummins (1970) research indicates that second language (L2) development is based on first language development (L1); there is a linguistic interdependence between L1 and L2 language and literacy development. Most ELLs in bilingual programs have are exited at the end of 3rd grade at which point they may not have gained sufficient proficiency in their L1 to transfer those skills to their L2 in terms of CALP (Cummins, 2000).

De La Luz Reyes (2001) found that often children who enter school as biliterate seldom got a chance to continue in biliteracy programs as the main goal in early exit or subtractive bilingual education programs is to have the children become fluent in English as quickly as possible. Research from Delgado-Gaitan (2001) and other researchers on literacy practices in the home, indicates that involving parents to read to their children in the home in the native language, improves student educational outcomes.

Children have a natural desire to know things and use that as a goal to drive their curiosity. “We need to expose children to language-rich and content-rich settings that can help them acquire the broad array of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that build a foundation for literacy and content learning. The early years are just too precious to get it wrong.” (Neuman, 2010) (p. 303). Using their sociocultural background is the perfect way to begin.

Parental Involvement and Literacy Practices

The National Early Literacy panel (NELP) report also focused on parental involvement and family literacy programs. There were three recommendations that clearly defined parental

involvement and family literacy programs. They “(a) Create an expanded definition of parent involvement and family literacy programs, (b) include programs that are familial and culturally competent and (c) develop expanded matrices for evaluating family literacy programs that reflect a more inclusive measure of effectiveness” (Dail & Payne 2010, p. 330). Literacy was defined as “social practice involving written language; characterized by dynamic, culturally situated, and multifaceted (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivancic, 2000; New London Group, 1996 Street, 1995)” (cited in Dail and Payne, 2010, p.330). The research found that children who showed to be early readers had parents or siblings who engaged them in shared book reading or read to the children. This showed how involved the families were in their rearing of their children at home including cultural understanding. This brought to light a connection that helped the children with literacy learning. Further it also showed the lack of parental involvement when the children were having difficulty in literacy. The NELP used the terms parent involvement, parent and home programs and family literacy interchangeably and described them as those “aimed at improving young children’s pre-literacy and literacy skills” (p. 331). The importance of using family literacy programs that are culturally relevant is emphasized. “Such programs provide materials, support, and flexibility for families to complete activities within their normal routines of daily living” (p.332). Illuminating the meaning of parent involvement and family literacy helps the parents, teachers and anyone who takes part in the rearing of each child find the role they play and how they will better help the child in their literacy development.

Sociocultural Theory

Although literacy and Biliteracy are important, research found that sociocultural and sociohistorical backgrounds of children are the backbone for acquiring literacy and biliteracy. Several studies researched the sociocultural and sociohistorical approaches of Lev Vygotsky. They commonly found that using the “funds of knowledge” the children come to school with are the backbone to success in the classroom. The teacher builds upon what the children already acquired in their social setting at school.

The lessons and activities the teacher creates predicts what they will take from the lessons. The teacher is the mediator. Research found that teachers should teach to the child’s potential and not to the developmental level of the child. The learning in the classrooms creates “Zones of Proximal Development” (ZOPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). This is defined by Vygotsky as “the distance between the actual level of development of the learner as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (p. 86)” according to research.

Researchers (Lonigan and Shanahan 2010) found that knowledge of the alphabet later helped with spelling; phonological awareness led to the ability to decode and further to help with reading comprehension (p. 341). Rapid automatized naming of letters and digits or numbers later helped with decoding and reading comprehension as well as rapid automatized of colors and objects. Writing the child’s name later helped with decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling. Phonological memory helped with decoding, reading comprehension and spelling. Also found was that children who learn through content rich activities acquire skills that help them gain meaningful knowledge, skills, and dispositions that set the foundation for learning literacy. Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (PRD; Snow, Burns & Griffith, 1998) was written in 1998 and primarily focused on early phonics but included phonemic awareness as a

prerequisite to early phonics instruction. They suggested early code-emphasis programs to be used as well.

FINDINGS

In this section, findings from the review of literature on the literacy development of ELLs in early childhood settings are provided. From the research, the findings indicate the support needed for ELLs to develop literacy in their first language and English (biliteracy). Through this research, we have gained a better understanding of how the children in general and ELLs in particular succeed in becoming literate and biliterate, including understanding their cultural and social backgrounds.

In response to research question on what factors support ELLs literacy development in early childhood classrooms, the literature reviewed revealed some important factors that yield success for ELLs. The review of the literature found important implications in the history of Latinos, literacy, biliteracy, and parental involvement. First of all, the treatment of Latinos in the early 1900's could be described as dehumanizing. Latinos and ELLs and being taught to solely become disciplined workers (Macedo, 1997). The need for educators to build on the knowledge the ELL's came with was lacking. In fact, education for Latinos and minority groups and immigrant to the U.S. focused on 'assimilating' these groups. Schools placed a major role in the process of Americanization of CLD groups. Educators did not focus education policy and practices that included the linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds that students brought with them to school. Communities and families, provide meaningful experiences for the learner and leads to literacy/biliteracy development.

Literacy is the foundation for each learner's success, beginning with phonemic awareness and ending with complete competence in a language. It was found that literacy is becoming more important in early childhood education (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). The implication that literacy begins at home with parents and families then proceeds to school was reiterated (María De la Luz Reyes & Halcón, 2001). The importance of parental involvement was also found to be fundamental.

In the realm of becoming a biliterate and bicultural society, the importance of Sociocultural and Sociohistorical backgrounds play an important role. The literature revealed that using both the sociohistorical and sociocultural backgrounds of ELLs are the backbone for acquiring literacy and biliteracy, which supports the students 'funds of knowledge' (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

SUMMARY

The focus of this research was to find factors that support ELLs' literacy/biliteracy development in early childhood classrooms. The historical experiences of bilingual students at the turn of the century indicated sub-par schooling experiences. Schools were part of the Americanization process for immigrant groups, Latinos and ELLs (Darder, 2012) (Wright, 2010). Educating children of immigrants became a problem for educators, policy makers and the education system. For ELLs education was segregated and there was an increase in formal testing (e.g. IQ tests) that then placed these students into special education classrooms/programs.

For literacy development, ELLs must rely on their first language and educators need to include students' sociocultural knowledge and skills. The research indicates that students not

only need to understand the literacy process (phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.), but instruction must be culturally relevant. In addition, involving parent in their children's education and literacy practices makes an impact on their educational outcomes. The research shows that understanding the student's sociocultural backgrounds and utilizing a funds of knowledge approach to the education of ELLs helps increase their academic success.

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