Helping Young Hispanic Learners

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They bring many assets to the education process. So why aren't they succeeding in U.S. schools?

Although we may label various racial and ethnic groups “at risk” in terms of education outcomes, many are less at risk in certain areas than the majority population. Empirical studies have shown, for example, that compared with children from U.S.-born families, children from poor immigrant families have lower infant mortality rates, suffer from fewer physical and mental health problems, and are less likely to engage in such risky behaviors as substance abuse, early sexual intercourse, and delinquent or violent activity (Shields & Behrman, 2004).

These strengths, however, are not always sufficient to keep children on pathways to education success. Bearing in mind that child development is an amalgamation of individual, family, school, and community factors, research suggests a number of actions that education policymakers and practitioners can take to improve the early education trajectories of Hispanics, the largest and youngest ethnic group in the United States.

A Heterogeneous Group

In 2005, one in five children 8 years old or younger in the United States was Hispanic (Hernandez, 2006). Moreover, Hispanic children make up approximately 80 percent of the U.S. English language learner population (Capps et al., 2005). Born inside and outside the United States, children of Hispanic (or Latino) heritage come from diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Recent growth in the young Hispanic population in the United States has been driven primarily by immigration from Latin America (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003).

A majority of young Hispanic children are of Mexican origin (65 percent), but substantial proportions have origins in Puerto Rico (9 percent), Central America (7 percent), South America (6 percent), Cuba (2 percent), and the Dominican Republic (3 percent) (Hernandez, 2006). Two of three young children of Mexican and Cuban origins live in families that immigrated to the United States, as do 9 in 10 children with origins in the Dominican Republic and in Central or South America.

It is important to note that the vast majority of young Hispanic children in the United States are U.S.-born citizens. Eighty-five percent of children with at least one South American-born
parent, 88 percent of those with a Mexican-born parent, and approximately 92 percent of those with a parent born in the Dominican Republic or Central America were born in the United States and therefore are U.S. citizens (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004; Hernandez, 2006).

**Their Strengths**

Hispanic children and families demonstrate a number of positive attributes. In an analysis of census data, Hernandez (2006) found that 77 percent of young Hispanic children (from birth to age 8) lived with two parents in 2000. The proportion ranges from 81 to 86 percent for young children in immigrant families from Mexico, Central and South America, and Cuba. However, after the first generation, the proportion of children living with two parents decreases in families from those regions, and from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico as well.

Young Hispanic children typically live in families with a strong work ethic and desire to succeed. Ninety-three percent of these children have fathers who worked during the year previous to the 2000 U.S. Census. Moreover, Hispanic children are approximately three times more likely than other groups to have additional working adults living in the home (Hernandez, 2006).

Despite low socioeconomic circumstances, Hispanic families demonstrate several positive physical health outcomes. Studies have consistently found that Hispanics have lower infant mortality rates, better birth outcomes, healthier diets, and lower rates of obesity than do whites (Escarce, Morales, & Rumbaut, 2006). These rates vary by group, however: Hispanics of Puerto Rican descent tend to have poorer health status than Hispanics of Mexican or Central American origin.

Although parents of young Hispanics, on average, do not have high levels of formal education, they express interest in enrolling their children in early education programs. A survey by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute found that more than 90 percent of Hispanic parents believe that it is “very important” or “somewhat important” for children to attend preschool (Perez & Zarate, 2006). Hispanic parents also have high education aspirations for their children (Nuñez, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Carroll, 1998). Most significant, they are willing to work hard within and outside of education environments to advance their learning opportunities (García, 2005).

Many young Hispanic children are also poised to become fully bilingual in Spanish and English. Given the social, cognitive, and economic benefits of bilingualism, schools would be wise to provide Hispanic children with opportunities to maintain and develop their dual-language proficiency.

**Their Challenges**

Currently, Hispanics lag behind their white and Asian American peers at all proficiency levels of reading and mathematics throughout their K–12 schooling (Braswell, Daane, & Grigg, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003). Some differences in achievement among racial/ethnic groups result from socioeconomic factors. For example, on average, Hispanics have a lower socioeconomic status than whites and Asian Americans do. However, using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (NCES, 2001),
Reardon and Galindo (2006) found that Hispanic children scored lower in mathematics and reading than did their white peers in all five socioeconomic quintiles. In a separate analysis, Reardon (2003) noted that these achievement differences from kindergarten through 1st grade were attributable to factors both in and out of school. In other words, practices in the home and school greatly influence racial/ethnic and socioeconomic achievement gaps in early education (García, Jensen, & Cuéllar, 2006).

The home language environment plays a considerable role in school achievement. Using data from a national sample of children born between December 2001 and January 2002, López, Barrueco, and Miles (2006) described the home language environments of Hispanic infants. The largest group (34 percent) lived in homes in which Spanish was the primary language, with some English spoken. Twenty-two percent lived in a home in which English was the primary language, with some Spanish spoken. Twenty-one percent lived in English-only homes and 19 percent in Spanish-only homes. Consequently, approximately three of four Hispanic infants heard Spanish spoken in the home, and 53 percent of infants lived in a home in which Spanish was the primary or sole language spoken.

Reardon and Galindo (2006) found that reading and mathematics achievement patterns from kindergarten through 3rd grade varied by home language environments. Hispanic children living in homes in which Spanish was primarily spoken lagged further behind white children than did Hispanics who lived in homes in which English was primarily spoken. The academic risk for children from non-English-speaking homes has been documented as early as the preschool years (NCES, 1995).

However, not all young Hispanic English language learners are equally at risk for academic failure and reading difficulties. In their analyses of group differences in mathematics and reading outcomes from kindergarten through 3rd grade, Reardon and Galindo (2006) found that Hispanic children of Mexican, Central American, and Puerto Rican descent scored lower than those of South American and Cuban descent. Also, first- and second-generation children from Mexican backgrounds scored lower than children from the third or later generations. Because achievement differences between whites and Hispanics were found at all socioeconomic levels, early academic risk appears to result from a combination of factors that include family poverty, low parental education, limited-English-proficient parents, and single status of the mother (NCES, 1995).

Making a Difference

Academic achievement gaps for Hispanics—especially for those who enter school not speaking English—exist at the beginning of kindergarten, solidify in grades 3–8, and result in significantly lower rates of high school completion and college attendance. Reform initiatives have not produced the necessary robust changes in academic performance because they often ignore “what counts” for the academic success of young Hispanic students. Programs and curriculums often do not take into consideration the fact that the children speak a language other than English; that they need to acquire high levels of academic vocabulary, discourse, and inquiry in English to succeed in content areas; and that their own cultural and linguistic
contexts are crucial ingredients in developing understanding of academic concepts.

With these considerations in mind, we offer several recommendations to improve education opportunities for young Hispanics in the United States. These recommendations highlight a double need: for policy and practice in early education to directly address language and for curriculum and instruction to reflect relevant culture and traditions.

**Rich Language Environments**
PreK–3 education environments of young Hispanic children should be rich in language. We define richness as a function of frequency and quality. In terms of frequency, research on cognitive development, language, and early experiences shows that the number of conversational exchanges between adults and young children is strongly associated with school readiness and academic success in formal schooling (Risley & Hart, 2006). Teachers, aides, and other school personnel should engage young Hispanic students in casual talk as much as possible and, where feasible, encourage parents to do the same.

In terms of quality, young Hispanics should hear English and Spanish spoken in the classroom and have many opportunities to express themselves in both languages, allowing for linguistic exploration. Meta-analyses and best-evidence syntheses suggest that bilingual or English-plus approaches to curriculum and instruction are preferable to English-only or English immersion programs (Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). For young children managing more than one language, academic skills are much more likely to develop and transfer between languages when environments provide access to knowledge through both languages in culturally relevant ways. Environments that do not provide this access can stifle cognitive development.

Rich language environments that integrate Spanish and English also facilitate important parent-school associations. Spanish-speaking parents are more likely to involve themselves in schools and classrooms in which Spanish is regularly spoken.

**Dual-Language Programs**
Young Hispanic children should have access to high-quality dual-language programs (that is, two-way immersion), which teach English and Spanish language skills through content. Integrating native English and Spanish speakers in the same classroom fosters ethnic and linguistic equity among students. Dual-language programs also promote Hispanic students' literacy development in English without compromising their Spanish skills (August, Calderón, Carlo, & Nuttall, 2006). Moreover, research shows that when young Spanish-speaking Hispanics and their native English-speaking peers are enrolled in dual-language programs, the academic achievement levels of both groups are equivalent to, or in many cases superior to, outcomes of students in mainstream classrooms (August, Calderón, & Carlo, 2002).

Researchers at the Center for Applied Linguistics (2005) have provided a set of principles to help school personnel establish and maintain high-quality dual-language programs. Programs should

- Implement a curriculum that promotes and maintains the development of bilingual,
biliterate, and multicultural competencies for all students.

- Use student-centered instructional strategies derived from research-based principles of dual-language education.
- Recruit and retain high-quality, dual-language staff.
- Have knowledgeable leadership that promotes equity among groups and supports the goals of additive bilingualism, biliteracy, and cross-cultural competence.
- Create positive, ongoing relations with students' families and the community.

**Universal Prekindergarten**

Hispanic children ages 3 and 4 should have access to free, state-funded preschool. Evidence suggests that high-quality prekindergarten programs improve school readiness for young Hispanic children and decrease achievement differences among racial/ethnic groups at kindergarten entry. These programs should have bilingual and culturally competent staff to effectively engage students and develop sustainable relationships with family members.

Moreover, states would be wise to adopt prekindergarten curriculums in both Spanish and English. States and local communities should work together to offer high-quality education experiences with a variety of schedule options. In states where state-funded prekindergarten is not available to all children, policymakers and program administrators should expand definitions of eligibility to include children with limited English proficiency. This intermediate step would increase Hispanic enrollments and serve more at-risk children until the state attains the broader goal of universal access.

**High-Quality Teachers**

Providing rich language environments and high-quality, dual-language programs in preK–3 requires high-quality, effective teachers. Teachers should be proficient in both English and Spanish and be knowledgeable about the cultural and linguistic circumstances of Hispanic families, particularly the academic strengths and needs of their children. Indeed, research shows that when teachers use Spanish in the classroom, it heightens the transfer of academic skills between languages and increases early achievement outcomes for young bilingual and emergent bilingual students (August et al., 2006). The most successful teachers are fluent in both languages; understand learning patterns associated with second-language acquisition; have mastered appropriate instructional strategies (such as cooperative learning, sheltered instruction, differentiated instruction, and strategic teaching); and have strong organizational and communication skills. These skills enable teachers to interact with Hispanic parents, encouraging them to engage in literacy activities with their children at home. Teachers with these skills can more easily learn important details about the linguistic backgrounds of their students and develop creative and accurate assessments of their students' linguistic ability and development.

When staff bilingualism is not feasible, schools should provide a language specialist. Language specialists serve as consultants and aids to teachers in the classroom to support Hispanic
English language learners. They are proficient in Spanish and English and have extensive training in second-language acquisition and in multilingual and multicultural education. Having a language specialist in the classroom will help monolingual teachers make essential links with Spanish-speaking parents.

Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, Pollard-Durodola, Mathes, and Hagan (2006) offer several research-based principles to guide reading instruction for Hispanic English language learners. These include

- Designing effective reading programs based on commonalities between reading instruction in English and Spanish.
- Recognizing that English literacy will require more explicit instruction in both phonics and word reading.
- Making connections between students' knowledge in Spanish and its application to English.
- Offering as many opportunities as possible for students to use oral language (in Spanish or English) to address higher-order questions.
- Capitalizing on all opportunities to teach and engage students in building vocabulary and concept knowledge.
- Organizing effective use of peer and cooperative group work to enhance learning.

**A Call to Action**

As U.S. educators welcome students to their classrooms, they frequently see a picture that differs from the school-day images of their own childhoods. Yet Hispanic children bring a set of welcome assets to the education process. It's high time we capitalize on these assets to improve the education outcomes of Hispanic students. By doing so, we will enhance not only the global competitiveness of the United States, but also the nation's social and economic well-being.

**References**


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