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Bridging the Latino Achievement Gap: The Importance of Interpreters in Schools

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Bridging the Latino Achievement Gap: The Importance of Interpreters in Schools

As a nation, we profess to believe in the equality of all people, but our education system often fails to reflect this belief. The sad truth is that immigrant children have more negative academic outcomes than non-immigrant children (e.g. Ricks, T. P., 2015). There are many proposed factors to explain this relationship, including socioeconomic status, a general failure to understand and accommodate students’ culture and language in the school environment, a lack of support systems in the schools, and cultural conflicts between teachers and students (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010). Immigrant students often face additional challenges in their schools on top of a new language to master. One example of these challenges is the separation of students into specialized “tracks” based upon academic abilities. This is one way that schools, perhaps unintentionally, reaffirm to students that their race is a factor in their academic abilities (Jagesic, 2015). The emphasis placed on the differences between the abilities of different groups, ethnic or otherwise, has been shown to produce effects of stereotype threat. When children are reminded of their membership in a group that stereotypically struggles in a certain academic area, they are more likely to struggle in tasks relating to that particular area (Steele & Aronson, 1995). No matter what the cause, it is a well-established fact that many Latino-immigrant children are struggling to compete with their peers.

One proposed factor for this difference that will be examined in this particular study is the relationship between parental involvement in academics and students’ academic outcomes. This involvement may include parents being present in the school environment, or being a part of their academic life at home. Children with parents who take interest and are involved in their academic lives, whether by helping with
homework, communicating openly with their child’s teacher, or some other means of involvement, seem to perform better in school. Parental involvement and academic outcomes are positively correlated - as parental involvement increases, students have been shown to have increased engagement in their environments at school, higher levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, higher perceived competence and control, more effective self-regulation and mastery goal orientation, as well as a higher motivation to read (Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005). This correlation has been examined and several theories have been suggested to explain it. Turney and Kao (2009) suggested that students’ “social capital” was enhanced by the involvement of their parents. Students with more social capital may feel more relaxed in the academic environment, or they may be placed into higher classes/tracks due to their parents’ involvement and communication with teachers and administrators. It has been demonstrated that parental involvement over time has a significant correlation with students’ positive academic outcomes (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007).

Immigrant children are at a disadvantage when it comes to parental involvement in schools and academic life. Children whose parents do not speak English often do not have the benefit of having parental help on homework, and their parents are often not involved in their academic life at school, either. It is difficult for parents who do not speak English or struggle to speak it fluently to communicate openly with administrators are teachers at their child’s school. It has become fairly commonplace for the children themselves to be used as interpreters between parents and the school environment (Cline, Crafter, & Prokopiou, 2014). They are required to explain any forms that come home in English, as well as to interpret any communication necessary between their parents and
teachers. This process is called Child Language Brokering, and it can create stress for the child, as well as limiting the complexity of communication and the potential for fully open communication between teachers and parents (Cline, et al., 2014). One way to reduce that stress and enhance parent involvement in school is for the school to provide an interpreter.

A study conducted by Palfrey (2014) investigated the difference in amount and complexity of information conveyed in interviews that were conducted using interpreters and interviews conducted without interpreters. The study found that having competent interpreters present was conducive to full communication. Further research has found that interpreters across cultures not only convey language, but help to bridge cultural gaps between those who are communicating, as well (Davitti, 2013). Another study found that having a team of interpreters and teachers working together influences the pace at which parties are able to communicate, the level of communication that occurs, and the overall levels of trust that are established during the interaction (Lopez, 2000). The presence of interpreters and translators in schools is paramount to facilitating proper communication of both language and culture between immigrant parents and the administration and teachers responsible for their child’s education.

The goal of the present study was to investigate (a) how Latino immigrant parental involvement is related to their children’s academic outcomes, (b) how poor language fluency can restrict that parental involvement, but (c) how the presence of an interpreter might enhance that parental involvement. Specifically, it was hypothesized that parental involvement in schools would predict students’ academic outcomes. Additionally, it was hypothesized that parent language fluency would predict parental
involvement. Overall, it was predicted that these variables would have relationship of moderated-mediation in which parental language fluency predicts student’s academic outcomes mediated by parental involvement. The entire relationship was hypothesized to be moderated by the presence of interpreters and other interventions to improve the means of communication.

Methods

Participants

Both elementary-school children and their parents were interviewed. Of the 68 students interviewed (56% girls), 34 were in third grade and 34 were in fourth grade (age $M=9.02, SD=.85$). Thirty-two percent of the children were 1st generation immigrants and 55% were 2nd generation immigrants. All children were recruited through their schools (procedure described below).

All 68 of the parents interviewed (71% mothers, 29% fathers) who reported their immigration status were 1st generation immigrants. All but two parents who responded to the question emigrated from Mexico; of the remaining two, one emigrated from Honduras and one from Guatemala.

The study sample was drawn from a moderate-sized city in the Upper South that is 81% European American, 14% African American, and 5% Latino. The community is in a state that has seen a 235% increase in the Latino population since 1990, the tenth largest increase in the U.S. The school district consists of 35,429 students from 49 schools (32 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and 5 high schools), with 2,137 students enrolled in English as a Second Language.
Students in the current study were drawn from 19 participating schools: 1 of which was predominantly Latino, 4 of which were predominantly African American, 13 of which were predominantly European American, and 1 which was ethnically diverse (with roughly equal proportions of European American, African American, and Latino students). Approximately 25% of participating students came from schools where less than 10% of the students attended ESL classes; 60% of the students came from schools containing less than 25% of students in ESL. Thirteen schools in the district did not participate because they had fewer than five Latino third or fourth graders.

**Child Procedure and Measures**

Children were recruited first. Following a brief introduction about the general goals of the study, consent forms (printed in Spanish and English) were passed out to qualifying students in participating schools (any student identified as “Hispanic” by the school). Several follow-up visits were made to the schools to remind students about returning their forms. Only children who returned signed parental consent and who gave assent participated in the study. Upon completion of data collection, participants were given a $15 gift card to a national discount store.

On data collection days, all children were interviewed in a quiet part of the school. The academic measures were always given first and thus unaffected by the other measures.

**Academic Outcomes.** Based on Fuligni et al. (2005), children were asked about their attitudes regarding school. All children were asked parallel questions about language arts and math, which served as single item indicators for analyses. Specifically, they were asked 4 questions about the importance of success in language arts and math
(e.g., “It is important that I do well in language arts/math”), their enjoyment of language arts and math (e.g., “Do you find doing language arts/math interesting?”), and their self-efficacy in language arts and math (e.g., “How good are you at language arts/math?”). To assess academic performance, children reported their grades in language arts and math. Scores ranged from 1 (Below C-) to 10 (A+), with higher numbers indicating higher grades. In their meta-analysis, Kuncel, Crede, and Thomas (2005) indicated high average correlations between self-reported grades and school records.

**Parent Procedure and Measures**

Once children’s data had been collected, all parents who had already given consent for their children were contacted via telephone. A Latina, bilingual Spanish-speaking interviewer explained the parental portion of the study to them, and if they gave verbal assent, they were interviewed (51 interviews were conducted in Spanish). Participants were asked a number of questions about their own education, their attitudes and behaviors concerning their children’s education, their own immigration experiences, and beliefs about community involvement. Each phone interview took approximately 45 minutes. Upon completion of their interview, parents were mailed a $15 gift card to a national discount store.

**Parents’ English fluency.** To assess English fluency, parents were asked, “How well do you speak English?” Parents responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1=poorly to 5=very well).

**Parental involvement: Monitoring and Values.** Parents were asked to identify their level of academic monitoring in the following 3 items on a 3-point scale (with 1 being “I never do this,” 2 being “I sometimes do this,” and 3 being “I always do this”): “I
know how my child is doing in school”, “I talk to my child about things related to what he/she is doing in school”, “I keep track of my child’s progress in school or know his/her grades in school”. Items were averaged to form one aggregate score of parental monitoring, with strong internal reliability (α= .90). Parents were also asked to identify their transmission of intrinsic and extrinsic academic values using the same response scale for the following 4 items: “I tell my child to work hard”, “I have rules about homework and studying”, “I set aside space in our home for homework and studying”, and “I tell my child that education is important”. Items were averaged to form one aggregate score of academic value transmission, with strong internal reliability (α= .80).

**Interpreter presence at school.** Parents were asked if the school provided an interpreter for them, whether the teachers at the school speak Spanish, and whether any school materials are written in Spanish. A composite score will be created to indicate how much schools provide interpreted information to parents.

**Results:**

Hypothesis 1 was not supported – the current study was unable to replicate results found in various other studies regarding the correlation between parent involvement and student outcomes. Hypothesis 2 was supported, the current study found fluency to be a significant predictor of parent involvement in a variety of forms. Hypothesis 3 was not supported, as the mediation model predicted relied on the significance of the correlation between parent involvement and student outcomes. Hypothesis 4 was partially supported, as the presence of an interpreter was a significant predictor of parent teacher interactions, though it was not found to moderate the relationship predicted in Hypotheses 1-3, as
efforts to prove the relationship significant failed. Though the current study failed to find support for the original model of a moderated mediation between parental language fluency, parental involvement, academic outcomes and presence of interpreters, there were several interesting results found throughout the process of data analysis.

In relation to the support of hypothesis 2, fluency was found to be a significant predictor of parent-teacher interaction ($r = .34, p < .05$), monitoring ($r = .45, p < .05$), homework ($r = .27, p < .05$). Fluency did NOT significantly predict the amount of value placed on education in the home ($r = .21, p$ not significant).

Of parents interviewed, 58% reported that they were confident in their abilities to speak well enough to communicate directly with their child’s teacher. 42% of parents reported they did NOT feel comfortable enough with their English abilities to communicate directly with the teacher. Of the 42% that reported not being able to communicate directly, 78% had access to an interpreter and 22% did not have access to an interpreter.

The presence of an interpreter moderated the association between fluency and parent-teacher interactions. Specifically, fluency was entered as a predictor of parent-teacher interactions in two regular analyses. One analysis examined parents at schools with an interpreter and another was used for parents at schools without an interpreter. For parents at schools with an interpreter, fluency significantly predicted parent-teacher interaction, $F(1,51)=5.19, p < .05$, $\beta = .31$. At schools without an interpreter, fluency significantly predicted parent-teacher interactions $F(1,13)=7.73, p < .05$, $\beta = .63$. While both analyses proved to be significant correlations, it is evident that fluency was a much
stronger predictor of parent-teacher interactions at schools without an interpreter ($R^2 = .39$ at schools without an interpreter vs. $R^2 = .09$ at schools with an interpreter).

The mean scores of parent teacher-interactions (scores range from 1-4 with higher scores indicating more interaction) were found to be significantly different when there was an interpreter versus when there was no interpreter. These means are represented in Figure 1.

**Discussion:**

The current study found that fluency is a significant predictor of many factors that impact the education of immigrant children. Parental language fluency highly correlates with the amount of monitoring of student achievement that occurs, how much help and guidance is offered in regards to homework, as well as the frequency of direct parent-teacher interactions. The key finding of this study, however, lies in what is not significant. While fluency was a significant predictor of all the behaviors previously listed, it was not a significant predictor of the degree to which parents and families valued education. This is to say that parents can place high value on education but still find themselves unable to engage in behaviors to assist their child – such as monitoring, homework assistance, and interacting with their child’s teachers. This finding is an incredible argument for providing resources to these parents, such as interpreters, to help bridge the language barrier and assist students in achieving their potential.

Unfortunately, one part of this study that did not work as predicted was connecting the findings to student academic outcomes. While parental involvement has been shown in many studies in the past (Gonzales-DeHass, Willems, & Holbein, 2005), the current study failed to find a significant correlation between parental involvement and student
outcomes. Additionally, this study failed to find a significant connection between fluency and academic outcomes. Researchers suspect that these problems are likely due to the small sample size and lack of statistical power, rather than the predicted relationships between these variables not existing in the real world. In future research, perhaps a larger sample size over a wider geographical area can assist in reaffirming the predicted correlations.

Another key finding from this study was the lack of access to an interpreter for parents who did not feel comfortable speaking directly with their child’s teacher. Of the parents interviewed, 58% said they felt comfortable speaking directly with the teachers, and therefore did not need an interpreter. Of the other 42%, however, only 78% of parents had access to an interpreter. That leaves 22% of the parents who cannot communicate directly with teachers without access to an interpreter. Increasing the presence of interpreters can help to limit this number and ensure that all parents have the opportunity to be involved in their child’s academic careers via parent-teacher interactions.

As far as the importance of interpreters being present for parent-teacher interactions, it was found that the association between fluency and parent-teacher interactions when there was NO interpreter present was stronger \((r=0.63)\) than when an interpreter was present \((r=0.31)\). This helps support the idea that having an interpreter present allows more parents the opportunity to communicate more fully with their child’s teacher. This idea was also supported in the additional analyses of the relationship between fluency and parent-teacher interaction. These analyses found that fluency accounted for (according to the \(r^2\) value) 39% of the variance in parent-teacher
interactions in schools without interpreters, but only 9% of the variance in parent-teacher interactions at schools with interpreters. The value of interpreters lies in the reality that communication between parents and teachers is not only more frequent, but of higher caliber when an interpreter is present than when there are no resources for the parent to communicate with the teacher.

Overall, though the current study failed to find significant correlations between the variables predicted in the hypotheses, the study supported the underlying concept of the original model. This concept was the hope that research can provide a way for the Latino achievement gap to be decreased. While this study cannot be generalized beyond the small community in which it occurred, the principles behind it certainly merit additional research that will hopefully lead to a shrinking of the academic achievement gap between immigrant children (Latino and otherwise) and non-immigrant children.

This study, in combination with previous research, suggests that having interpreters in schools is one way to help shrink the achievement gap between immigrant children and non-immigrant children. The finding that parental language fluency does not predict the degree to which a family values education is support for the idea that the achievement gap is not a result of immigrant families not caring about the education of their children, but rather a result of the situation in which these families are attempting to educate their children.
References:


Tables and Figures:

Figure 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency Level</th>
<th>No Interpreter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Fluency</td>
<td>1.69 (.22)</td>
<td>1.47 (.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Fluency</td>
<td>1.92 (.41)</td>
<td>1.61 (.42)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Numbers represent mean scores and standard deviations of parent-teacher interactions; scores range from 1-4 with higher scores indicating more interaction.