

# Literacy Interventions that Promote Home-to-School Links for Ethnoculturally Diverse Families of Young Children



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From the moment children come into the world, they begin to participate in everyday activities that play a critical role in shaping their development. Families decide on the types of activities appropriate for children, the frequency of these activities, who should be involved in the activities, the roles assumed by each participant, as well as the language and the behaviors expected of participants (Tudge, 2008). These decisions, and in particular expectations about the child's role, are guided by a number of proximal and distal factors to the family, including its composition, material and economic resources, time distribution in the home, as well as various characteristics of the immediate and larger community, such as access to playgrounds and the safety of the neighborhood. Equally critical, however, are the values and beliefs of parents and the community, especially those related to children, such as how to expend material resources, specific ideas about optimal child behavior and development, the best way to parent, and the status of children in the family and community, among others (Rogoff, 2003). As children take part in these everyday activities, they develop the cognitive, language, and socio-emotional skills, as well as the social knowledge and competence requisite to become full-fledged members of their community. Through this process they also acquire a cultural toolkit (Swidler, 1986, 2001) that can be drawn upon selectively as they take action and make meaning in their everyday lives. This toolkit of cultural resources expands as children grow, develop, and are exposed to different ways of being, doing, thinking, acting, and learning.

The approach adopted in this chapter rests on this view of development. We believe that all human practice is cultural in nature. We do not espouse a deterministic, static, or essentialized view of culture; instead, we believe that individuals engage in multiple communities of practice, that culture is embedded in these

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practices, and that culture is dynamic, shifting over time in response to changing conditions (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003; Swidler, 2001). We argue that relying upon existing cultural resources can foster children's early educational success not only through the acquisition of new knowledge and skills but also by forging positive and productive home-school connections.

## Home-School Connections

Research, theory, and practice related to home-school connections are often grounded in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory, which posits that children's experiences with parents and teachers at home and at school (i.e., microsystem-level effects), as well as the interactions between these two contexts (i.e., mesosystem-level effects), are critical in informing children's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Although the construct has been operationalized and used in a variety of ways, at its core, home-school connections imply bidirectional interactions between teachers and families, whereby parents and teachers work together to support children's development and learning (Cox, 2005; Kim & Sheridan, 2015). These connections can occur at the individual level (i.e., parent-teacher conferences) or at the institutional level (i.e., school-wide events for families; Epstein, 1995). In fact, the more interactions there are between schools and the children's families and communities, the more opportunities there are for children to receive consistent messages about education and schooling (Epstein, 1995). Positive and effective home-school connections have direct effects on supporting children's academic and nonacademic (e.g., social-emotional) outcomes (Cox, 2005; Epstein, 2001). At the same time, they scaffold school success indirectly, by leading to increased parent engagement (Halgunseth, 2009), often through supporting greater feelings of teacher and parent self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey, 2011).

In addition to encouraging multiple pathways for communication between families and teachers, interventions that seek to bolster home-school connections often focus on ensuring consistency (i.e., "common, parallel activities...across settings") or continuity (i.e., "coordinated and planned interactions to encourage stimulation or provide support") between home and school practices (Kim & Sheridan, 2015, p. 6). Consistency and continuity can be seen across language and interaction styles, as well as behavioral expectations and discipline styles (Barbarin, Downer, Odom, & Head, 2010). Indeed, there is a wealth of literature geared toward policymakers and practitioners alike suggesting that both consistency and continuity are vital for children's achievement (e.g., Barbarin et al., 2010; Crosnoe, 2015; Crosnoe et al., 2010; Kim & Sheridan, 2015). Particularly during the early childhood years, continuity is seen as a critical factor in predicting the extent to which parents feel like collaborating with their children's teachers, as well as the extent to which children acclimate to the school environment and, ultimately, to their overall educational success (Barbarin et al., 2010). As a result, there have been countless interventions

that have sought to support home-school communication by emphasizing, explicitly or implicitly, the importance of continuity.

Nevertheless, some degree of discontinuity is to be expected, given the innate differences between the home setting (where children are used to being a key focal point of their parents' attention) and the school setting (where children often vie for their teachers' attention). Moreover, a mismatch between home and school practices might actually be advantageous for children (see, e.g., Doucet, 2011; Schick, 2014). Not only might discontinuity serve as a protective factor, such that a given practice in one setting (i.e., the home or school) might serve to compensate for a lack of exposure to said practice in the other setting (Barbarin et al., 2010), it also can expose children to a breadth of learning styles and expectations (see Hemphill & Snow, 1996). However, few research studies have examined these discontinuities as potential sources of protection or investigated what forms of discontinuities might be beneficial, as well as for whom and under what circumstances (but see Schick, 2014). The focus of most research continues to be on home-school continuity and views discontinuity as a potential source for discord between families and teachers and a risk for child outcomes (Heath, 1983/1991). Notably, educational practices in the United States have historically been grounded on European-American<sup>1</sup> mainstream values, beliefs, and practices (Rogoff, Tukanis, & Bartlett, 2001), and about 80% of teachers in the United States are White (NCES, 2017a). Thus, children from ethnoculturally diverse backgrounds are more likely to experience discontinuities between practices and skills supported in the home and those expected by the school. As a result, the bulk of intervention efforts attempt to align the practices and parental behaviors of ethnoculturally diverse families to those expected by the school (and, by extension, to those culturally rooted in White middle-class practices), oftentimes overlooking or disregarding existing practices in the home.

Yet, as of the 2015 school year, slightly more than half of all children enrolled in US public schools were from ethnoculturally diverse families, and that percentage is expected to continue to rise over time (NCES, 2017b). Efforts to understand the disparity in educational outcomes between majority White and ethnoculturally diverse children, especially during the early childhood years, have identified numerous contributing factors, including families' educational expectations and practices, as well as the alignment between home values and activities and those espoused by the school system. As such, recent policies and intervention efforts have focused on supporting children's school success by strengthening the connection between the home and school (for a comprehensive review, see Sheridan & Kim, 2015). Although Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory posits the influential role of the larger cultural context—the macrosystem—in both the micro- and the mesosystems, discontinuities between school and home practices for ethnoculturally diverse families, and in particular for those from lower income communities, are often, and sometimes unintentionally, seen from a deficit perspective. In other words, there remains an implicit yet pervasive view that parents' practices and beliefs are less

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<sup>1</sup>In this chapter, we use the term mainstream European-American and White interchangeably to refer to the dominant ethnocultural group in the United States.

valuable than those of the larger dominant culture and, by extension, those of the school. This devaluing of home-based practices does not create a solid base on which to build strong and productive home–school relations.

Throughout this chapter, we argue that successful home–school connections must take a culturally grounded, bidirectional approach. That is, interventions should identify and target points of leverage, utilizing existing cultural practices as strengths to establish connections between home and school. In addition, interventions should not only focus on families but also must target schools by bringing culturally salient practices into the classroom settings. While the main ideas discussed in this chapter are applicable to children from diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, we have chosen to focus on preschool-aged Latino children and their families living in the United States, as Latino children not only constitute a sizable portion of our nation’s future but they also experience the greatest economic and educational disparities (Padilla, Cabrera, & West, 2017; Wildsmith, Alvira-Hammond, & Guzmán, 2016). We use the term *Latino* in its broadest and most inclusive sense to refer to individuals who have cultural roots in a Spanish-speaking country in the Americas or the Caribbean. Thus, in this chapter, Latino immigrants are defined as immigrants to the United States from a Spanish-speaking country in the Americas or the Caribbean, as well as their US-born children. As a cultural group, US Latinos represent diverse racial, ethnic, national, linguistic, and immigration backgrounds, as well as socioeconomic status. Despite this heterogeneity, however, US Latinos do share a core set of cultural, linguistic, and social values, as well as shared experiences of oppression and inequity that structure and define their everyday lives (Suárez-Orozco & Pérez, 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). This chapter focuses on those shared experiences.

## Home-School Connections for Latino Children

Latino children constitute about 20% of all US children and 25% of US children under the age of five, the overwhelming majority of whom were born in the United States. Although they live in families who represent 19 different Spanish-speaking countries, about 66% are born into families of Mexican descent (Murphey, Guzman, & Torres, 2014). About half of US Latino children live in an immigrant household where English is a second language, and around 20% of them live in “linguistically isolated homes”—that is, a household in which *all* members who are 14 years old or older have some difficulty with English (Wildsmith et al., 2016). Although Latino children come from families representing all socioeconomic strata, a large percentage of Latino children live in families who experience economic hardship. Statistics show that about 35% of US Latino children live near poverty, about 13% live in poverty, and about 12% live in deep poverty (i.e., family income is less than half the poverty line; Wildsmith et al., 2016). Moreover, about 38% of Latino children in the United States have mothers with less than a high school education. The combination of these general living conditions places Latino children among those US-born

children who currently face the greatest need, and are also most vulnerable to experience developmental and educational difficulties. For Latino children and their families, and in particular for those who are recent immigrants and who live in low-income communities, this vulnerability is exacerbated by the home-school discontinuities that arise from cultural differences in both expectations and best practices.

Despite the diversity that exists within and across Latino groups in the United States, Latinos share key cultural values and socialization goals that both shape and are reflected in the everyday practices of their households, especially for those that include children (Rogoff, 2003; Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Some of these shared cultural experiences include, for example, the centrality afforded to the family, the hierarchical structure of the family, the participation of family members in organized Catholicism, as well as the kinship patterns among nonrelatives (*compadrazgo* y *comadrazgo*—godparenthood; Bridges et al., 2012; Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995; Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2009; Valdés, 1996). These shared cultural experiences shape parenting practices that largely emphasize an increased awareness of the other by demonstrating *respeto* (i.e., respect) and affection, as well as behaving flexibly according to the social demands of situations (Fischer, Harvey, & Driscoll, 2009; Valdés, 1996). Latino children, therefore, are socialized to be *bien educados* (i.e., to know how to adjust their behavior depending on the context), to be *cariñosos* (i.e., emotionally warm), and to respect and obey family members and individuals of higher status as marked, for instance, by age (i.e., elders) or profession (i.e., teachers). Latino families' caregiving practices, thus, prioritize supporting children's relational and emotional skills by encouraging them to think of themselves as part of a larger group, and to make decisions about their behaviors and actions in relation to others (Durand, 2011). This emphasis is very different from that of the larger US culture that encourages children's independence and prioritizes parents supporting children's pre-academic skills, such as numeracy, language, and early literacy (Fischer et al., 2009).

Unsurprisingly then, in large-scale comparative studies with other major US ethnic/cultural groups, Latino children, on average and across ages, demonstrate well-developed social-emotional abilities, including prosocial and self-regulation skills (Padilla et al., 2017). At a young age, Latino children readily recognize authority and behave accordingly, and are able to regulate their emotions and behaviors successfully according to the social demands of the immediate context (Fischer et al., 2009; Li-Grining, 2012). However, they show less developed cognitive, expressive language, word recognition, and preliteracy skills (Padilla et al., 2017); Fuller et al., 2009. Although the gap in these academic domains closes from school entry through second grade, national statistics show that Latino children, as compared to children from other ethnocultural groups, continue to lag behind in reading, math, and science throughout the school years (Reardon & Galindo, 2009; Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006).

Policymakers and researchers have attempted to address this persistent academic gap through various efforts. However, the great majority of these efforts, or at least

those receiving the most attention, have problematized Latino families' practices, rather than acknowledged and addressed the cultural discontinuity between home and school. In other words, rather than examine and reconsider how schools are not meeting Latino children's needs, and suggest culturally relevant ways to prepare teachers to do so, the emphasis has been largely on identifying the factors that explain differences by focusing on the skills that Latino children lack. This work has identified economic factors, lower-educational attainment of primary caregivers, and lower incidence of mainstream parent-child activities as partly responsible for the academic gaps (Fuller et al., 2009; Padilla et al., 2017), with the great majority of studies focusing on language and literacy outcomes. Large-scale national studies, for example, show that Latino families are less likely than families from other ethnocultural groups to engage in home literacy activities with their young children (e.g., National Research Council, 1998; Padilla et al., 2017). Explanations for the lower incidence of home literacy routines have mostly pointed to neighborhood characteristics, financial resources, and language issues, most notably lack of English skills. For instance, Spanish-speaking Latino immigrant communities are often located in urban centers with high levels of poverty and limited resources. Thus, families from these communities are less likely to have access to bookstores and libraries (Reese & Goldenberg, 2008), and, by extension, to printed materials, in particular children's books in Spanish (Schick & Melzi, 2016).

However, the more limited engagement in home literacy activities that is characteristic of US Latino families is not solely a function of print access. As discussed previously, Latino families have different expectations and values surrounding their preschoolers' education, as compared to mainstream European-American families. Latino families, especially recent immigrants to the United States, believe that literacy is a skill that should be taught at school and that it is learned through formal instruction and rote practice (Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Thus, emergent literacy behaviors, such as noticing letters and print, pretend reading, and scribbling, are not regarded as occasions for learning and are not consistently emphasized by Latino parents prior to children entering school (Goldenberg, Gallimore, & Reese, 2005).

For similar reasons, reading with young children, a quintessential adult-child practice in the dominant US culture starting at birth, is not deemed as particularly necessary in some Latino communities. Unsurprisingly then, Latino children between the ages of 0 and 5 are read to less often than are children from dominant US ethnocultural groups (Padilla et al., 2017). In line with the emphasis placed on children's socio-emotional development, when children are read to, the purpose is to teach life lessons and to encourage closeness between parent and child (e.g., Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984; Zentella, 1997), rather than to support children's language and literacy development. Moreover, as compared to mainstream US American mothers who tend to engage in back-and-forth exchanges with their children as they read, Latino mothers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds prefer to approach reading as a sole narrator who tells an engaging story and encourages the child to listen actively rather than contribute to the creation of the story (Caspe, 2009; Melzi & Caspe, 2005; Melzi, Schick, & Kennedy, 2011).

Given these differences in literacy-related practices, numerous intervention efforts have focused on strengthening home-school connections by training low-income Latino immigrant parents to adopt more culturally dominant (i.e., White European-American) models of literacy. One prime example is dialogic reading, a renowned reading intervention program for caregivers and children that is grounded in the back-and-forth exchanges that naturally occur in middle-class European-American US homes and that has been found to be effective in helping to build children's early literacy skills (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Dialogic reading teaches caregivers to elicit information from their children and to encourage their participation when sharing storybooks, an approach that is not salient among Latino caregivers, as previously noted. Although dialogic reading is linked to a wealth of positive outcomes when used by middle-class, European-American caregiver-child dyads, results of meta-analyses on the effectiveness of dialogic reading on children's literacy outcomes have shown that it might not be as beneficial when implemented with low-income families (e.g., Manz, Hughes, Barnabas, Bracaliello, & Ginsburg-Block, 2010; Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). Moreover, results of a recent intervention study showed that training low-income caregivers to engage in dialogic reading does not lead to an increase in children's narrative skills or expressive language skills. Instead, results of the intervention suggested that the quality of the narratives shared by children whose mothers were in a dialogic reading training actually decreased over time (Reese, Leyva, Sparks, & Grölnick, 2010).

These findings are best understood in light of research that has shown that interventions that attempt to change parental practices do not produce the desired outcomes because they often fail to acknowledge that parental behaviors and practices are but one thread of the larger tapestry of practices that are imbued with local childrearing goals and that reflect deep-seated parenting values and beliefs. In addition, programs that disregard the applicability of the intervention to the cultural reality of the families served often fail to recruit and retain families (Kumpfer, Alvarado, Smith, & Bellamy, 2002). For example, in an initial attempt at a parent-child literacy intervention with Pan-Latino families, Janes and Kermani (2001) reported a dropout rate of 70%. Moreover, of the families who remained in the program, only 30% demonstrated knowledge of the strategies taught. Instead, most caregivers viewed picture book reading as *un castigo* (i.e., a punishment), and this was reflected in the ways in which they engaged with their children and the storybooks. For example, during book sharing interactions, the caregivers and children lacked physical contact and positive affect (e.g., smiling), caregivers used minimal intonation, and children rarely responded to or initiated topics. Perhaps most reflective of the lack of enjoyment was that caregivers often expressed relief when the task was complete. The book sharing, thus, lacked the dynamic, interactive styles that past research has posited are essential for transmitting literacy knowledge (e.g., Bus, 2001).

Notably, book- and reading-based intervention programs that are introduced by individuals who have earned, by virtue of their occupation, caregivers' respect and trust have been met with less resistance. For example, parents naturally change their reading practices in response to encouragement from their children's teachers and

pediatricians (Golova, Alario, Vivier, Rodríguez, & High, 1999; Reese & Gallimore, 2000). Perhaps the most successful program of its kind, *Reach out and Read* (ROR) is an initiative throughout the United States which seeks to increase the frequency of parent-child book sharing by having pediatricians distribute developmentally appropriate books to children at their well check-ups and encouraging parents to read to their children. Research has shown that caregivers view *Reach out and Read* positively, and that it has supported successfully the early literacy skills of children from low-income families, including Latino children, most notably by increasing vocabulary, as well as print and phonemic awareness skills (Diener, Hobson-Rohrer, & Byington, 2012; Mendelsohn et al., 2001; Sharif, Rieber, Ozuah, & Reiber, 2002).

To date, however, most interventions seeking to support home-school connections for Latino children have attempted to do so by changing caregivers' behaviors and activities to match school expectations. While these efforts are well-intentioned, there is an underlying deficit perspective with regard to best practices. In other words, the implicit message being shared with teachers and caregivers is that low-income Latino families need help in supporting their children better because they do not know how to do so, and are therefore, putting their children at risk. This approach is problematic for two main reasons: First, as researchers and educators, we have an ethical obligation to ensure that children have the opportunity to maintain and develop their cultural roots. In fact, ethnoculturally diverse children who develop strong and secure ethnic identities have better developmental and educational outcomes (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Second, implementing programs without local adaptations will likely fail to ensure parent participation and/or fail to produce the desired outcomes. Thus, rather than simply seeking to change family practices, it is imperative that educators learn about the expectations and practices prevalent in the children's homes, and that they make explicit efforts to strengthen home-school connections in meaningful and authentic ways by building on these practices, instead of replacing them (Fantuzzo, McWayne, & Childs, 2006).

Thus, educators of young Latino children should be familiarized with research that documents that, though their practices differ from those of White European-American middle-class families, Latino families do engage in home literacy activities (e.g., Reese & Gallimore, 2000; Reese & Goldenberg, 2008). For instance, while Latino families might have fewer books at home, it does not mean that preschool-aged children are not exposed to any print. In fact, Latino caregivers frequently expose their preschoolers to environmental print for functional purposes, pointing out letters and words on food labels at the supermarket, and on signs while riding on public transportation or walking down the street as a way to entertain children. They also encourage children to "write" their names or "read" to themselves or with their older siblings (Schick & Melzi, 2016; Wasik & Hindman, 2010).

Perhaps most notably, although books might not be commonly shared between Latino caregiver-child dyads, sharing oral stories is a frequent pastime in Latino homes (Billings, 2009). This practice is of significance, as research has shown that oral stories shared during the preschool years are predictive of children's school readiness development, including oral language and early literacy skills (Reese, 1995), cognitive skills (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006), as well as social-emotional



skills (Curenton & Craig, 2011). Among the forms of oral narratives shared in Latino families are family reminiscing (i.e., conversations about past experiences), traditional stories marked by *dichos* (i.e., popular sayings), as well as personal stories that include *consejos* (i.e., advice). Latino caregivers use family and personal stories, *dichos*, and *consejos* to transmit cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes from one generation to the next (Cortez, 2008; Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Espinoza-Herald, 2007; Sánchez, 2009; Sánchez, Plata, Grosso, & Leird, 2010; Valdés, 1996). The sharing of these oral stories serves to help caregivers and children bond, but, at the same time, is used by caregivers to help children learn to think critically and make independent decisions (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005), both of which are integral to children's development and school success. Not surprisingly interventions that have sought to encourage Latino caregivers' oral storytelling through family reminiscing have been met with success (e.g., Reese et al., 2010). Overall, then, we argue that to support Latino children's academic success, policymakers, researchers, and educators should take a strengths-based approach by identifying existing home practices and building on these home practices.

## Culturally Grounded Efforts to Build Home-School Continuity for Latino Children

To date, most culturally grounded intervention programs have targeted family practices and parent behaviors that support children's learning and development. While the focus of these interventions is on the family, the underlying idea of these interventions is to enhance what the family is doing by building on existing practices and drawing connections to the cultural resources of the family. There are also classroom-based interventions that help teachers build connections with children's home by bringing family practices and cultural resources from the home into the classroom. Below we review some of the successful interventions in both realms for which there is empirical evidence.

**Family-based programs** Recently, a small body of work has emerged that aims to build on the cultural resources that immigrant families possess, capitalizing on the everyday ways caregivers engage with their children and the values, traditions, and lessons embedded within these interactions. More specifically, recent intervention programs have targeted families by supplementing caregivers' usual practices through: (1) adapting book sharing materials to align with immigrant families' cultural values and traditions to promote engagement with materials and receptiveness to new literacy techniques, or (2) by integrating techniques into regularly occurring everyday family conversations outside of book sharing to support children's language and literacy development.

As noted above, low income, ethnoculturally diverse families have fewer print materials at home and more limited access to bookstores and libraries in their

communities (González & Uhing, 2008). Furthermore, despite the increasing number of children's books available in languages other than English, these books are often poorly translated versions of English texts that fail to reflect the values, relationships and traditions of other cultures. In fact, Latino parents have commented that reading to children from commercially available storybooks is uncomfortable, as they feel pressured to ensure their interpretation of the storybook's theme and message is accurate. As a result, they lack confidence in their ability to transmit literacy to their children (Janes & Kermani, 2001). Recognizing these challenges, intervention programs, three of which we describe below, have sought to create literacy materials that are more aligned with low-income, immigrant caregivers' preferences.

In response to the ineffectiveness of a traditional caregiver-child book reading intervention (i.e., by the high dropout rate and the lack of enjoyment experienced by parents), Janes and Kermani (2001) redesigned their program to match the literacy forms used by the families they served and the larger Latino culture, including, *fotonovelas* (comic books), traditional poems, songs, jokes, riddles and oral stories. Through collaborative workshops, families created storybooks inspired by culturally laden narratives, resulting in a series of books that was family-centered and focused on imparting lessons *para educar a los niños* (to educate/raise children), a theme that is prevalent in Latino parenting. Results showed that parents who shared the self-created storybooks not only reported enjoying reading with their children, but in comparison with parents from the original intervention, adopted an *afición* (characterized by performance) reading style. The *afición* style was demonstrated by verbal engagement (e.g., changing intonation), nonverbal engagement (e.g., smiles and winks), pride in text (e.g., reference to authorship and physical handling of book), and shared positive affect (e.g., playful teasing). The positive results of the program suggest that when training efforts take a strength-based approach, Latino parents will share books in an effective, engaging manner. This work also highlights the importance of using culturally relevant materials, as those that are not tailored to Latino values and traditions were ineffective resources for parents.

Using a similar approach, Hammer and Sawyer (2016) developed a program they called *Madres Educando a Sus Niños*, in which they trained parents to use interactive reading strategies with a book series developed specifically for the program. The book series, developed in partnership with caregivers from the community centers on the Álvarez family, who encounter various cultural values, traditions or events (e.g., visit to homeland to visit family, learn important lessons about respecting others) that are reflective of the culturally salient messages mothers from the community wished to impart to their children. The themes were aligned with typical narratives shared in Latino homes, including family reminiscing (i.e., conversations about past experiences), and *consejos* (i.e., advice) used to transmit cultural beliefs, values and attitudes (Cortez, 2008; Delgado-Gaitán, 1994; Espinoza-Herald, 2007; Sánchez et al., 2010). Using this book series as a basis for discussion, coaches taught mothers a reading strategy for each book in the series (e.g., modeling, vocabulary) and provided culturally appropriate activities they could do with their children (e.g., tell stories about their childhood or family related to the theme of book).

Results showed that, overall, mothers reported enjoying the program, specifically noting that they valued sharing aspects of their culture with their children. When compared to a control group, children whose mothers received training showed greater gains in lexical complexity and sentence length, showing that, through book sharing, caregivers were able to foster their children's development of essential school readiness skills through book sharing. Moreover, findings suggested that through the use of books and activities that embed culturally salient themes and messages, caregivers are able to connect to and engage with literacy practices and materials.

Finally, as part of a larger literacy initiative intended to help schools, teachers and parents foster children's emergent literacy skills, Rowe and Fain (2013) provided caregivers with culturally relevant dual-language books in both text and audio formats via the *Family Backpack Project*. This initiative drew on immigrant families' unique practices for engaging children with stories and texts through the use of conversations about family, community and cultural activities. Family backpacks included culturally sensitive books and a reader response journal. Additionally, to support caregivers who might lack the literacy skills necessary to read to their child, audio recordings (in the home language) and CD players were provided. Families were encouraged to read the books in their home language and construct a journal response to what they read. The instructions for these responses were left open-ended so that caregivers could discuss, interpret and reflect on the texts in a manner that allowed them to engage naturally with their child and the text. Survey results showed that families read the books multiple times throughout the week and were appreciative of the dual language books and recordings, noting that they made the texts more accessible. Moreover, analyses of response journals showed that caregivers and children engaged in discourse about the pictures, events, lessons and characters within the books, with the majority of conversations centering on retelling the stories and making personal and family connections to books shared. Families responded in a number of ways, some parents wrote or drew the response, some children were the sole authors, and for other families, a combination of caregivers (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents) and target children participated in the response journals. These results are promising, once again demonstrating the importance of providing families with culturally relevant materials and activities.

Yet, book-based interactions are not the only context through which caregivers transmit essential language and literacy skills. During everyday family routines, young Latino children are often exposed to extended discourse, another important predictor of reading and overall school success. Caregivers have the opportunity to model and scaffold rich language exchanges during activities such as family reminiscing and mealtime conversations. Recently, intervention programs have begun to capitalize on these everyday oral language practices of Latino families. Two such initiatives are described below.

Cesar and Nelson (2014) integrated literacy practices into everyday family reminiscing activities by encouraging families to engage in further dialogue and reflection about past events and to practice emergent writing skills. The intervention, which they called *SALSA (Supporting Acquisition of Language and Literacy through*

*Home-School Activities*), used children's drawings as a mechanism for communication and interpretation. Families were given a bag to take home from their child's school that contained an interactive journal, as well as writing and coloring implements. Caregivers were encouraged to discuss family activities with their children and to draw pictures that represented the details of their conversations. When compared with a group that was given books about shapes and numbers, intervention group parents had more positive reactions about engaging with the program materials. Parents indicated that they enjoyed the program activities and that they particularly valued the extra time they spent speaking with their child. Furthermore, children in the intervention group showed significant gains in alphabetic principals, print concepts and general language skills, demonstrating the potential success of integrating school-based strategies with home practices in a culturally relevant manner.

Additionally, Leyva and Skorb (2017) capitalized on the importance of food in Latino homes through their intervention, *Food for Thought*. Food preparation activities are frequently viewed as a family activity, seen as opportunities to develop closeness and share important cultural values (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). Food-based interactions can serve not only to impart cultural teachings but also serve as a rich context for language and literacy development, as research demonstrates that families naturally use elaborative decontextualized talk and scaffold children's abilities more in contexts related to food than typical book-sharing activities (Snow & Beals, 2006). *Food for Thought* embedded language and literacy activities such as narratives, explanatory talk, writing, and phonics into activities such as grocery shopping, cooking, eating out, and planning a family celebration. During weekly meetings, parents were introduced to new strategies for fostering language and literacy (e.g., open ended questions, encouraging writing related to food activities, breaking words into sounds) that have been associated with positive academic outcomes for young children (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002). In addition, they watched videos of other Latino parents implementing these strategies, and were given the opportunity to practice new strategies with their own children. Parents were also provided with take-home materials and homework to integrate literacy practices into their daily interactions (e.g., encourage children to dictate, draw and/or write a grocery list for the families' trip to the store). Results showed that parents successfully implemented these strategies and children whose parents attended more family meetings had larger gains in vocabulary skills. Parents also commented that the strategies were easy to implement and were reminiscent of *consejos*, making the program easy, doable, and enjoyable, as it was relevant to their own cultural practices. Promising parent and child outcomes in the early phases of this intervention suggest that mealtime interactions are a culturally relevant context to support Latino caregivers' development of strategies to foster children's emergent literacy skills.

These culturally grounded family-based intervention programs are a promising change from the typical implementation of one-size-fits-all programs that often lack authenticity and applicability for ethnoculturally diverse families. Integrating family's cultural beliefs into educational programming promotes children's positive academic outcomes (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 2005). In each of the

aforementioned book-reading programs, caregivers responded enthusiastically to the cultural relevance of the materials provided and enjoyed engaging with the books provided. Thus, findings suggest that choosing materials that represent families' values, beliefs, and traditions might serve as a way to bridge the disconnect that often occurs in book-based family literacy interventions, (see Reese & Gallimore, 2000; Reese & Goldenberg, 2008), which, in turn, supports children's academic success. Similarly, *SALSA* and *Food for Thought* highlight the importance of taking a strength-based approach by supporting family literacy practices that happen in the home. By embedding literacy into typical family routines, caregivers are able to support children's development through familiar cultural discourse practices.

Overall, results of these culturally grounded intervention efforts show that caregivers are more receptive, engaged, and supported when intervention programs demonstrate an appreciation for and inclusion of their culture and values. Moreover, children demonstrate positive gains in school readiness skills, not typically found in programs that take a more prescriptive approach. However, to strengthen home-school connections for children from ethnoculturally diverse families, efforts must go beyond focusing on parents' behaviors and practices and include adapting classroom practices. In other words, the knowledge, expertise, and traditions that children bring into the school must be incorporated into their everyday classroom learning experiences (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

**Classroom-level interventions** All children enter the classroom with a wealth of cultural resources intended to help them participate—and succeed—at school. Building on these sources of knowledge is critical for children's school success, but all too often educators are unaware of these resources, and sadly overlook opportunities to draw upon this foundational knowledge. Indeed, there is increasing empirical evidence showing that bringing children's home knowledge and experiences into the classroom is an effective way to encourage children's learning (Ríos-Aguilar, 2010; Rodríguez, 2013). Luis Moll and his colleagues (1992, 2005) were among the first to propose the use of this approach to inform classroom curricula through their *funds of knowledge* approach, which acknowledges that homes and communities have cultural and cognitive resources that can be used and exploited successfully for classroom instruction. For example, preschool teachers might have caregivers complete a form in which they note their home and their communities' practices, activities, and traditions, such as home language, parent knowledge and expertise, and preferred family outings and activities. Teachers can then use this knowledge to inform the activities they do in the classroom. By appreciating, understanding, and using the knowledge already available to students in both the home and the community, teachers can help establish meaningful and productive connections between this knowledge and the classroom curriculum (McWayne, Mistry, Brenneman, Zan, & Greenfield, 2018). In addition, incorporating funds of knowledge in an authentic way has the potential to disrupt the devaluing of home practices (González et al., 2005), as well as transform power dynamics between home and school communities (Ríos-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011; Rodríguez, 2013).

Although there is a growing acknowledgment of the importance of building curricula around ethnoculturally diverse children's funds of knowledge (see, e.g., Souto-Manning, 2013), few interventions to date have sought to implement and test this approach. Recently, however, a small body of work has emerged demonstrating success in supporting Latino children's academic success across a variety of developmental domains by bridging home and school practices in culturally grounded, meaningful ways. For example, to capitalize on the unique oral heritage of Latino families to support children's success in the classroom environment, early childhood and elementary school classroom curricula have been augmented to include oral storytelling and creative theater (Melzi, Schick, & Scarola, 2018; Souto-Manning, 2013), and curricula have been expanded to draw on family members' skill-sets and expertise, with family members then invited to the classroom to lead lessons and share their knowledge (e.g., Souto-Manning, 2013). Although educational literature is replete with suggestions and models for integrating culturally salient programs in schools to establish home-school continuity successfully and respectfully in the service of providing the best educational environment for children from ethnoculturally diverse families (Epstein, 1995), information on the effectiveness of these programs stems from anecdotal, descriptive data. While descriptive research is necessary and provides rich information about the programs, in order to exact large-scale change, evidence from randomized trials is needed to measure whether these classroom practices do, in fact, support Latino children's school success in meaningful ways. One new intervention program that has sought to fill this gap is *Reading Success Using Co-Constructive Elaborative Storytelling (R-SUCCESS; Melzi et al., 2018)*.

*R-SUCCESS* is an intervention that we have been implementing in New York City preschools serving Latino children from low-income communities. *R-SUCCESS* is grounded on the evidence that shows that strong oral language skills enhance children's reading readiness, in particular unconstrained reading skills, those that cannot be directly taught, such as comprehension (Snow & Matthews, 2016). To support children's language skills, *R-SUCCESS* capitalizes on Latino families' oral practices by encouraging teachers to incorporate oral storytelling into their classroom routines. Teachers in *R-SUCCESS* classrooms can choose to make up a story, adapt a book as an oral story, or seek parents' assistance in selecting *dichos*, *consejos*, heritage stories, or legends on which to base the story to be shared. Each storytelling session is then divided into three main components: pre-telling, telling, and post-telling. During pre-telling, teachers are encouraged to set the stage for the story through co-construction. In other words, pre-telling activities are designed to provide teachers with an opportunity to build rapport and knowledge with the students, as well as to ensure child involvement during the telling. For example, after briefly introducing the story, teachers might elicit predictions about what will happen during the story, introduce and define key words, and/or familiarize the children with a phrase or *dicho* to be repeated during the telling. In the telling segment, teachers go beyond the here and now to create meaning solely through language and to do so in an engaging and elaborative manner that captures the children's interest. As they share the story with their class, teachers are encouraged to

move between the roles of sole narrator and co-narrator, thereby scaffolding children's active listening skills, in addition to their active participation. Finally, in post-telling, teachers support children's comprehension skills, through the use of open-ended recall questions. At the same time, teachers help the children distance themselves from the story, reflect upon what they have heard, and make connections to their own experiences. By removing the book as a focal point of the narrative interaction and encouraging teachers to rely solely on language to create meaning, R-SUCCESS supports children's oral and academic language skills. In other words, because R-SUCCESS involves the sharing of oral (rather than print-based) stories, children's understanding and story imagery rely solely on the language they hear.

A series of pilot studies exploring the effectiveness of R-SUCCESS in Head Start classrooms, when compared to classrooms trained in dialogic reading and business as usual classroom practices, has yielded promising findings. For example, after matching children in R-SUCCESS classrooms and dialogic reading classrooms on a host of demographic variables and baseline skills, R-SUCCESS was found to be as effective as dialogic reading in supporting Latino preschoolers' expressive and academic (i.e., as measured by vocabulary diversity, conversational autonomy, and narrative macro- and microstructure) language, and was more effective in supporting children's receptive language skills and their overall ability to engage in storytelling successfully. Moreover, R-SUCCESS children showed greater growth in social-emotional skills across the preschool year as compared to children in dialogic reading classrooms (Melzi, Schick, & Scarola, 2017). A second set of findings showed that when compared to their peers in business-as-usual classrooms, R-SUCCESS children were more successful at sharing narratives (both personal narratives and book sharing narratives) independently, and shared stories with greater coherence and more sophisticated language (Melzi & Schick & Scarola, 2016). Finally, a third study explored the effectiveness of R-SUCCESS in supporting ethnoculturally diverse (56% Latino) preschoolers' academic language during a semi-structured play routine. Findings highlighted that, compared to dialogic reading, R-SUCCESS was more effective in supporting key indices of preschoolers' academic language, such as providing context, chronologically sequencing information, and using sophisticated language when sharing a prompted story about the character figures and toys the children were playing with (Schick, Wuest, Scarola, & Melzi, 2017). Taken together, these findings have important implications for policymakers and educators, as the results suggest that training teachers to incorporate children's cultural funds of knowledge into their curriculum is an effective way to support seeking to support the school success of Latino children.

## Conclusion

Extant research has documented the importance of home-school connections for children's learning, as well as for a successful transition into formal schooling (Crosnoe, 2015). The US educational system has relied on the home-school

connections common among middle-class, English-speaking European-Americans as a model for how families and schools should work together to support children's development and learning. As statistics show, children from ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse communities face disproportionate challenges upon school entry and throughout their academic trajectory. In the past, the families and communities themselves have been blamed for these difficulties, with the belief that, by virtue of their culture and socioeconomic circumstances, they failed to provide supports the children needed to succeed in schools. Historically, intervention efforts attempt to change current family practices to be more aligned with mainstream practices as a way to foster the skills children were "lacking." In doing so, these interventions are also stripping families of their cultural practices, and perhaps removing protective factors. These efforts have also perpetuated the deficit lens too often used in the fields of education and developmental psychology to understand the development and learning of children from ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse communities.

In this chapter, we focused on the home-school connections targeted to support Latino preschoolers' early literacy development, though we believe that these ideas are applicable to children from diverse ethnocultural and linguistic communities. We argued that, to be successful, home-school connections need to take a culturally grounded approach. In other words, efforts to bridge home and school must begin by identifying existing practices in children's homes and communities, and then use these practices as points of leverage to support children's learning. We presented five family-based interventions that relied on Latino families' cultural values and practices to support children's reading and writing. Two of these interventions created picture books in partnership with families to highlight socialization areas that parents considered important for their children, and three capitalized on the everyday experiences of and interactions between Latino parents and preschoolers as a way to support both early reading and writing. In all cases, parents reported enjoying their participation and demonstrated high levels of engagement, which in turn yielded positive child outcomes.

Nonetheless, as we argued throughout the chapter, we strongly believe that home-school connections must take a bidirectional approach, that is, they should focus not only on families but must also on schools by bringing culturally salient practices into the classroom setting. One effective way of doing so is by building on children's cultural funds of knowledge. We presented evidence from a recent intervention we have been implementing that supports children's early reading through incorporating cultural oral discourse practices into the classroom. Results show that capitalizing on families' funds of knowledge and practices strengthens home-school connections and supports children's early literacy. More efforts such as these family and classroom-based interventions are needed to change, once and for all, the lens through which we—both the larger society and the educational system—use to perceive and regard children from ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse communities. We must shift what we choose to emphasize; we must focus on what children bring from home and what they can do as the most important means to support them as they embark on a successful path toward learning.



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