**EARLY LITERACY PRACTICES**

**AND BELIEFS AMONG HISPANIC FAMILIES**

**IN JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA**

Maira Martelo, Ed.D.

Florida Institute of Education University of North Florida

# ***Policy Brief***

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EARLY LITERACY PRACTICES AND BELIEFS AMONG HISPANIC FAMILIES IN JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA

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## Key points

* Hispanics are the fastest growing minority group in the United States. By 2035, one- third of American children will be of Hispanic origin. Ensuring that Hispanic children are ready for success in school is important.
* Hispanic caregivers who participated in the present study said they care deeply about their children’s education, but some said they do not feel capable of supporting their children’s learning.
* Hispanic caregivers who had children enrolled in VPK reported being more engaged in their children’s education.
* Families face barriers to participation in VPK and need help overcoming these barriers.

## Introduction

By the time many Hispanic children enroll in prekindergarten programs, they are already behind in several literacy measures when compared with their White counterparts. This makes educational endeavors very challenging for Latino children. Nationally, only 71.4 % of Hispanic students obtain a high school diploma on time in comparison with 93.5% of Asian students, and 83% of White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In addition, only 19% of Latino adults have a college degree, compared to 42% of White and 26% of African American adults (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011).

## Why is this issue important?

Research supports the correlation between education and the economy. If the fastest growing minority is not thriving academically, their chances of having a good quality of life can be threatened. People with higher levels of education tend to have higher incomes, which could lead to better health outcomes and more participation in civic life. It is estimated that by 2035, one-third of American children and one-third of the total population of the United States will be Hispanic (National Council of La Raza-NCLR, 2010). By improving the academic performance of Hispanic children, we could potentially help improve their quality of life, reduce the achievement gap regarding educational attainment, and reduce future costs for health care and social services.

Many of the educational challenges Latino children face in this country start before they enroll in the formal educational system. The belief system Hispanic parents have towards education has a direct impact on the type, quality, and frequency of literacy practices they promote at home.

**Improving the academic performance of Hispanic children could
reduce the achievement gap and reduce future social costs.**

## Who participated in this study?

The findings presented in this policy brief are taken from a mixed-method study that compared beliefs about education and literacy practices among Latino caregivers who had their 4-year-old children enrolled in the Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK) and parents who had not enrolled their children in early childhood programs at the time of the study (Martelo, 2013). A total of 125 surveys were collected from 74 caregivers with children enrolled in VPK and 51 without children enrolled in VPK. Twenty interviews were conducted: 10 with Hispanic parents with children enrolled in VPK and 10 without children enrolled in VPK. The surveys and interviews were collected in three settings: six preselected VPK centers with high Hispanic enrollment, five Hispanic churches, and two local Latin stores in Jacksonville.

## What did we learn?

* Hispanic caregivers who participated in this study seemed to care deeply about their children’s education and said they view education as the path for their children to improve their quality of life. Yet some of them expressed feeling not fully capable in their efforts to support their children’s learning experience. The study participants were aware of the importance of reading to their children and engaging in other literacy activities, such as storytelling; however, some of them did not have the time or the knowledge to engage in the process.
* The surveys and interviews revealed playing games, drawing pictures, and looking at books with their children were the most common literacy practices in which Hispanic caregivers engaged. Some participants, particularly caregivers whose children were participating in VPK programs, were more likely to engage in their children’s education and experience fewer barriers to reading at home.
* The results suggest that if Hispanic parents had struggled with their own education and lacked the proper English language skills, their ability to help their children become ready for school is reduced.
* Level of bilingualism and parents’ beliefs about education were some of the non- structural factors related to early literacy skills that were specifically explored in the present study.
* Another finding was that there were differences in the amount of time spent reading to children as well as in the type and quality of engagement in literacy activities based on Hispanic children’s enrollment in VPK. Hispanic caregivers who had their children enrolled in VPK reported being more engaged in their children’s education and experienced fewer barriers to reading with their children.
* Country of origin played an important role in differentiating Hispanic parents in their beliefs about education as well as in their literacy practices at home. From the diverse group of participants in the study, Mexican caregivers were less likely to perceive themselves as playing a key role in their children’s education, and they also reported experiencing more barriers in their literacy activities when compared with parents from Cuba and Puerto Rico. Overall, enrollment in VPK was related to the type of barriers to reading activities that Hispanic parents experienced as well their country of origin.
* Even though programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, and VPK are available in Jacksonville, Hispanic families may experience barriers to participation; among the barriers are a lack of transportation, language barriers, and legal status. Even though immigration status was not explored in this study, some participants still talked openly about it. Although the registration form for VPK was available in Spanish, a section related to providing “proof of residency,” although translated correctly, had an association in Spanish to the legal status of parents. A simple issue like this could play a role in some Hispanic parents’ decision about enrolling their children in VPK.

## Recommendations for Practice

* Educators and civic groups must encourage the enrollment of Hispanic children in prekindergarten programs. The reality of many Hispanic children is not only characterized by poverty but also by numerous constraints that come with it, such as parents’ low level of education, language barriers, and financial limitations. The combination of these factors probably explains why nationally only 36% of Hispanic children living in poverty are currently enrolled in early childhood education programs (Kohler & Lazarin, 2007).
* Hispanic organizations, such as churches, associations
* from the different countries, as well as the Hispanic Mayor’s Advisory Board and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, could initiate campaigns to promote the importance of early childhood education, especially among those parents who have not enrolled their children in childcare. For many children, their first exposure to learning activities happens when they enroll in programs such as VPK. In informal conversations with parents before the interviews, many of them expressed their frustration with being unable to help their children, either because they did not understand the school system or due to their language barriers. A series of workshops about early literacy practices targeting diverse Hispanic parents could help parents better support their children’s literacy skills.
* During data collection for the study, several early childhood educators informally mentioned that many of the Hispanic children came to the childcare centers without knowing basic concepts such as colors, numbers, and shapes. However, one difficulty for VPK teachers may be that many of the Hispanic children’s literacy skills are in Spanish and may be not as easily accessed for English-speaking teachers. Therefore, it would be beneficial for these educators to be aware of the literacy practices taking place in these children’s homes. In-service training for VPK teachers is recommended so they can better understand existing differences between home and school literacy environments.
* It is easier to create programs that influence non-structural factors, such as parenting style, involvement, and beliefs about education, than making changes in structural factors, such as socioeconomic status and immigration status. Special attention should be given to diverse Hispanic caregivers coming from Mexico, as the present study suggested that they may be less involved and may experience more barriers.
* Hispanic organizations should use different informational strategies to encourage parents to engage in learning activities with their children at a young age rather than waiting until their children are enrolled in formal schooling. At-home literacy practices should be viewed as a positive contribution to Hispanic children’s learning and should therefore be used as a springboard to expand upon for future research. The promotion of literacy activities at home among Hispanic families should include diverse practices such as community and family activities in addition to traditional practices, such as book reading, labeling, and teaching the alphabet (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005).
* Hispanic organizations could also create a campaign to make Spanish language literacy materials available to Hispanic families through the preschool centers. Having Spanish materials available for families will help with the acquisition of early literacy skills, so parents can read to their children and engage in meaningful conversations about the reading materials.
* When reaching the diverse Hispanic communities, it is important to collaborate with local agencies that are trusted by this population and include all possible strategies and places, such as churches, local Hispanic media, stores, and laundromats where Hispanics congregate in the city in order to contact as many people as possible.
* Making the results of this study available for early childhood educators could help diminish preconceptions about Hispanic parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Many educators tend to believe that diverse Hispanic parents are not interested or engaged in their children’s education (Almarza, 2005; Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007). In reality, however, Hispanic parents have high expectations concerning their children’s academic performance but feel less capable of helping them achieve their academic goals because they do not understand how the educational system works (Ortiz & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2005).

## Policy Implications

* All stakeholders, policy makers, community organizations, and early childhood educators should pay close attention to the diversity within the Hispanic population. Hispanic children tend to be behind in several literacy measures even before they enroll in prekindergarten programs. However, researchers have pointed out that children with Mexican and Central American ancestors tend to be lower performers when compared to other Hispanic peers (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007). The results from this study reinforce the need for differentiated strategies when approaching the topic of early literacy. Even though all Hispanic parents could potentially benefit from any educational initiative, it is clear that Mexicans and Central American parents will need to be especially targeted as they experience more barriers to helping their children be ready for learning. The family-orientation that is characteristic of Latin families could be used as leverage to help them to be engaged more productively in their children’s education.
* Reviewing the age requirement for enrollment in state-supported early learning is highly recommended. Currently, only children who are 4 years old by September of each year can enroll in VPK. That requirement leaves numerous Hispanic families without access to early childcare until their children are almost 5 years old. These children may be eligible for Head Start or Early Head Start, but many Hispanic families may not be aware of this option.

## Recommendations for Research

* Detailed information about Hispanic parents’ beliefs about education and their literacy practices at home could help educators and Hispanic organizations better engage and connect with this diverse group. In particular, Mexican and Central American families should be targeted, as these children are among the children with lower academic performance.
* Observations of the literacy practices at home would be a complementary research method to explore what really happens in the family environment and may help educators address the disconnect between what happens in homes and what happens in schools.
* For future research, it would be ideal to have enough participants for each country of origin, socioeconomic status, and level of education so that these variables could be further explored. As the results of the present study pointed out, these may be important variables in differentiating beliefs
* about education and early literacy practices at home.
* Another important direction for future research would be to explore the languages used at home to determine if beliefs about education and literacy practice at home vary depending upon the primary language or languages used in the home.

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