

Family Matters Related to the Reading Engagement of Latina/o Children

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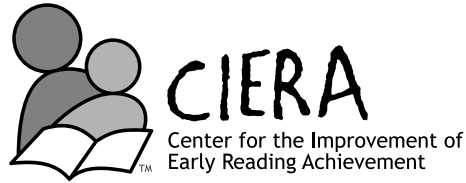
CIERA Inquiry 1: Readers and Texts **What is the relationship between family ecocultural factors and Latina/o children's engagement in reading?**

This article reports on the relationship between ecocultural (Weisner, 1984) features of 18 Latina/o families and their children's motivation to read. Five ecocultural features emerged as salient in families' daily living: immigration, culture and language, nurturance, instrumental, and workload. Ecocultural features were examined in relation to children's perceptions of themselves as readers (self concept as reader and value of reading, [Gambrell et al., 1996]). Nurturance related to how much children valued reading, culture and language related to how children viewed themselves as readers, and workload was inversely related to how much children valued reading. Our findings indicated that questions about how and why children read are seen more clearly through a sociocultural lens, as the expression of culturally, historically, and socially mediated processes.



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Daily family routines are central to all aspects of child development, yet little is known about the relationship between these family matters and specific aspects of children's literacy development, such as motivation to read. These routines (what families do, as well as how, when, and why they do it) can provide important information about children's roles, expectations, and experiences within specific out-of-school learning situations. In this study we examine the relationship between some of these family matters and children's reading engagement.

There are ongoing attempts to explain the complexities of why some children become engaged readers and others do not. Research on the literacy practices of diverse social groups has advanced our understanding of the impact of some out-of-school factors. Another line of research on reading engagement has linked motivation to literacy development. In this study, outside school factors—namely, home influences—are examined in relationship to the reading motivation of Latina/o children. Based on the premise that participation in a social group's repeated routines is the single most important influence on a child's development (Weisner, 1984), we considered the possibility that family routines would also impact children's literacy development

Recent decades have seen increasing efforts to study the literacy experiences of diverse social and cultural groups. This is particularly true with respect to English learners (especially Latina/o students) who begin to fall behind in reading and writing as early as the second grade (De La Rosa & Maw, 1990). Early research linked the low academic achievement of Latina/o students to family factors such as parents' lack of education and inability to provide a home socialization process that would meet the requirements of a literate society (Heller, 1996; Holtzman, Díaz-Guerrero, & Swartz 1975; Ingle

1970; Jensen, 1973). However, studies such as Heath's (1983) spurred others to take a closer look at how home literacy practices might differ from those valued and rewarded at school. Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, and Hemphill (1991) for instance, found that dinner conversations about "not immediately present" topics related positively to the literacy-related language skills of children from low-income neighborhoods. It quickly became apparent that families of similar background and income, seemingly homogenous, were actually equipping their children in diverse ways. If types of dinner conversation could have an effect on literacy development, then other daily activities might also warrant scrutiny. Following this line of thought, Teale (1986) examined literacy in the home as it was mediated by various domains of activity, including, for example, the family religious activity (including Bible reading).

There is mounting evidence that seemingly similar families within a single social and cultural group may actually differ in their home literacy-related experiences (Delgado Gaitan, 1990; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Monzó & Rueda, 2001; Teale, 1986; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Notwithstanding the overall lower achievement of Latina/o students in reading¹, there is a substantial range of variation within this population. Such variability, combined with our understanding of the relationship between family factors and literacy, suggested to us that home-related experiences needed further examination.

As Yaden, Rowe, and MacGillivray (2000) observed, emergent literacy and home research has examined parents' perceptions on how literacy is used and acquired; home factors and achievement; and the dynamics of family literacy practices. These studies have used a variety of methods for gathering and analyzing data, including qualitative approaches such as ethnography, quantitative approaches such as checklist observations, and various combinations of the two types. The understanding of how individuals become literate is continuously being revised in an effort to appreciate the process in all its complexity. However, many questions about how families' cultural practices and daily living experiences bear on their children's reading motivation remain unanswered.

Researchers have begun to argue that motivation plays an important role in literacy development. Interest in the affective aspects of motivation, in addition to its cognitive components, has prompted the study of engagement in diverse literacy activities and contexts, including classrooms, schools, and intervention programs. This line of work has produced a view of the engaged reader as one who is motivated, knowledgeable, strategic, and socially interactive (Baker, Afflerbach, & Reinking, 1996; Gambrell, Palmer, Codling & Mazzoni, 1996; Guthrie and Wigfield, 1997).

1. In 1992, test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress for children at age 9 showed Latino children trailing behind their white peers in reading by 26 scale points. This gap persisted throughout the children's primary schooling. In that same year, the reading scores for 17-year-old Latinos were 26 scale points below those of white 17-year-olds. Indeed, Latino 17-year-olds were reading at about the same level as white 13-year-olds (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

Motivation research has long focused on the individual. For instance, cognitive theories explain motivation as if it was constituted by individual cognitive processes, isolated from their social contexts. Similarly, reading engagement has been defined as "...the individual's personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading" (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000, p. 405).

In contrast, this study builds on the existing body of research that recognizes learning and development of literacy as culturally, historically, and socially mediated processes (see for example, Cole, 1996, Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Rogoff, 1995; Rueda & Moll, 1994; Wertsch, 1998). Sociocultural theorists, influenced by Vygotsky (1978), understand that individuals are participatory agents in the construction of their environment (Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993). Reading engagement, as such, is understood as a socially-mediated event. Authors such as Sivan (1986) and Ames (1992) have begun to examine connections between social contexts and differential motivation. Sociocultural studies are concerned not only with individual understandings of activities and performance, but also with the influences that shape and mediate activities and performance. Family contexts are one particularly critical influence. The daily family practices in which children participate may affect their access to school-based literacy activities; their notions of engagement and the organization of literacy practices; their appreciation of and interest in reading; and their idea of what counts as meaningful literacy.

An ecological and cultural approach known as ecocultural theory (Weisner, 1984) has been useful in "unpackaging" (LeVine, 1977) families' daily routines. The ecocultural approach provides us with information about important sociocultural dimensions of families. The main tenet of ecocultural theory is that ecological and cultural factors shape everyday family routines, which in turn produce the zones of proximal development in which developmental functions are shaped through interaction with expert others such as parents, older siblings, and grandparents (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 1993; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, Weisner, 1984). Recently, Reese, Garnier, and Gallimore (2000) explored the antecedents of emergent Spanish literacy and subsequent English reading achievement. The researchers used the ecological and cultural (ecocultural: ecology, resources, constraints; culture: values, beliefs, schemata [Weisner, 1984]) family factors of Spanish speaking students to develop a hypothetical model predicting school performance. Their model included both distal features such as parents' years in the U.S. and proximal features such as formal instruction, as well as environmental influences. Their research has provided important insight into a limited array of the ecocultural factors relating to children's reading performance.

This study examined families' daily routines, to better understand ecocultural family factors and their relationship to variability in reading—particularly motivation to read among Latina/o immigrant children. Our primary questions were:

1. What is the relationship between family ecocultural features and motivation to read?
2. Which family ecocultural features need to be closely examined?

In addition, the paper elaborates on how these ecocultural features might inform decisions about family support.

Methods

Sample

Our sample comprised 18 children and their parents from Latina/o families in a southwestern U.S. city. Participants were part of an ongoing longitudinal study on reading.¹ The children were second-generation immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador², whose families had been in the U.S. for anywhere from 5 to 28 years. Most families' living arrangements were nuclear, except for three 3-generation families and one family which shared living space with the child's aunt and two friends. The majority of mothers and fathers worked in non-unionized positions in the garment industry, usually doing piecework. Their average level of education was sixth grade, although two parents had at least one year of college in their home country.

All the children attended the same inner-city public elementary school. The school's population was almost entirely Latina/o. Approximately half of the student population at the school was part of a homeless education program and received 100% free lunch. Ten of the children in the sample were in the fourth grade, and 8 were in the third grade. There were 8 girls and 10 boys in the sample.

Measures

Families' Ecological and Cultural Context Measures

The research instrument that we employed to assess family features was a version of the Ecocultural Family Interview (EFI). The EFI applies ecocultural theory to the assessment of family adaptations, on the theory that family adaptation involves the balancing of ecology (resources and constraints), culture (beliefs, values, and schemata), and the needs and abilities of family

1. Supported by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). The principal investigator is Robert Rueda.

2. "First generation" is used to refer to the generation which immigrated. The children of first-generation parents are referred to as "second generation." Their children are third-generation, and so on.

members in the organization of their daily routines (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman, & Bernheimer, 1989). The EFI encourages parents to talk about this dynamic balance by blending multiple research traditions into a guided conversation framework and questionnaire, using both open-ended and direct, structured questions. The EFI interview comprises ten ecocultural domains, which have been defined theoretically (Weisner, 1984) and operationally for Euro-American families (Nihira, Weisner, & Bernheimer, 1994).

The Ecocultural Family Interview for Latina/o Immigrants (EFI-LI) was developed on the basis of extensive interviews with a random sample of 120 families, who were identified as having a Spanish-speaking child entering kindergarten at the start of a related longitudinal study (Coots & Arzubiaga, 1997). When the families were interviewed in their homes in the fall of their children's kindergarten year, they were asked a number of questions about family characteristics and demographics, parents' views and attitudes toward schooling, and their roles in the lives of their children. The families were re-interviewed by telephone in the spring and fall of each year and at home when the children were in third grade (Fall, 1993). They were also administered the EFI-LI twice during their child's fifth grade year. The interviews followed an in-depth, open-ended protocol. The researchers concomitantly visited a randomly-selected subset of 32 families 12 times each during the first three years to obtain more detailed ethnographic data. Ecocultural measures were obtained through use of the EFI-LI; additional items—including a variety of literacy- and school-related practices—were included based on current literature and ethnographic data. The EFI consisted of 83 items, which were scored on a scale from 0 (low) to 8 (high). The items covered themes related to finance, use of services, home-school linkages, home and neighborhood environment, domestic and childcare workloads, connectedness of family, language networks, formal and instrumental support, and families' use of sources of cultural information.

Children's Reading Motivation Measures

Children's reading motivation measures were based on the Reading Survey by Gambrell et al. (1996). The questionnaire consisted of 20 items, scored on a 4-point response scale. The survey assesses two specific dimensions of reading motivation: self-concept as a reader (10 items, $\alpha = .75$) and value of reading (10 items, $\alpha = .82$). Gambrell and colleagues report that their instrument has moderately high pre- and post-test reliability: self-concept = .68; value = .70.

The items focusing on self-concept as a reader obtained information about students' self-perceived competence in reading and their self-perceived performance relative to their peers, as in the following example:

When I come to a word I don't know, I can _____

- a) almost always figure it out.
- b) sometimes figure it out.
- c) almost never figure it out.

d) never figure it out.

The "value of reading" items obtain information about the value that students place on reading tasks and activities. For example:

Knowing how to read well is _____

- a) not very important to me.
- b) sort of important to me.
- c) important.
- d) very important.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Students were administered Gambrell et al.'s Reading Survey individually at school. The questionnaire was administered for about twenty minutes in the teachers' lounge, the library, or at a table in the courtyard, out of earshot of others. The surveys were in English and each item was read aloud to the student. Students were asked if they preferred English or Spanish; for those who indicated Spanish, the items and answers were read in English first and then immediately orally translated. The same procedure was used for students who indicated a preference for English if the researcher had noted some hesitancy during previous interactions, or for some reason suspected that the use of English might impede comprehension.

Each family also met with a trained interviewer for a 2- to 3-hour EFI. Most of these interviews took place in the families' homes, except for three which took place in the school, and one that took place on a soccer field. During the first part of the interview parents responded to direct questions about a variety of topics, including their demographics. The second part of the interview was a conversational discussion about the family's daily routine. Specific topics related to empirically-derived ecocultural domains were discussed.

Coding of EFI

Families were interviewed when a coding reliability of at least 80% was obtained for the ecocultural items during consecutive interviews by raters. Ongoing reliability checks resulted in 82% reliability for four cases. The reliability check is over 20% for all cases in the sample, exceeding convention (Gallimore, Weisner, Bernheimer, Guthrie, & Nihira, 1993; Nihira, Weisner, & Bernheimer, 1994).

Development of Ecocultural Features

Ecocultural theory posits that ecocultural domains are interrelated, and should not be expected to be independent (Nihira et al., 1994). Therefore previous EFI-LI factors (Coots & Arzubiaga, 1997) served as an initial guide for the identification of primary ecocultural features. New items were grouped on the basis of ecocultural theory, ethnographic findings, pilot work conducted during development of the interview, and correlational studies of coded EFI items. Five ecocultural features were identified.

The first of these dealt with issues of *immigration*. Immigrant families undergo processes of adaptation that differ from those experienced by non-immigrant families. The immigration feature comprised items addressing the effect of immigration on subsistence base, the effect of maintaining a home in the country of origin, the acculturation of couples, the effect of bringing up children in a host country, and families' views on and goals for integration. A high score on immigration indicated that the family was adapting to the host country and held positive views on their adaptation.

The second feature concerned *culture and language*. The items in this feature addressed families' promotion of culture and language: specifically, their involvement in Spanish and English language and cultural activities, in religious literacy activities, their use of media, and esteem of bilingualism. A high score indicated that the family had reported active pursuit of Spanish and English literacy and cultural activities.

A third feature addressed *instrumental knowledge*. This feature looked at families' access to and knowledge about school, their use of social services, and their political involvement. A high score indicated that the family had access to or knowledge about various institutions, including schools.

The *nurturance feature* was defined to include activities and time shared by family members, and family's efforts to provide an emotionally supportive environment, including the instillation of religious values, as well as encouragement about school and an academic future. A high score indicated that the family spent time together and appreciated the value of encouragement and emotional support.

Workload, the final feature, was defined by the degree of complexity involved in families' childcare and domestic workload, as well as the number of young children. A high score indicated that the family had a complex and heavy domestic and childcare workload.

Results

Reading motivation measures revealed wide variation in both self-concept and value reading. Ecocultural features also testified to this variation. Our findings indicated that in the following ways ecocultural features were related to children's perceptions of themselves as readers and their appreciation of reading:

- The culture and language feature was related to reader self-concept.
- Nurturance was related to value of reading.
- Workload was inversely related to value of reading.
- Immigration and instrumental knowledge did not relate to either self-concept or value reading (for more information see Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzó, & Arzubiaga, 2001).

Because our findings indicated that three ecocultural features—workload, nurturance, and culture and language—related to children’s reading motivation, these features were explored further. Simple Pearson correlations were computed between measures of reading motivation and ecocultural components of the three significantly-related features.

Correlations between the components of workload and children’s motivation measures (see Table 1) indicated that the complexity of domestic workload was inversely related to how much children valued reading ($r = -.58$, $p < .05$). The findings suggest that as domestic workload increases and becomes more complex and demanding, the value that children place on reading decreases. None of the other components of workload related significantly; however, they did relate in the same direction as domestic workload. Overall, our findings support the notion that as workload increases, children’s reading motivation decreases. The only exception to this was the component activity related to childcare.

Table 1. Correlation Coefficients Between Ecocultural Components of Culture and Language and Children’s Perceptions of Their Motivation to Read

ECOCULTURAL COMPONENTS OF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE	SELF CONCEPT	VALUE READING
Brokering	.11	-.17
Religious literacy activities	.49*	.21
Family promotes Spanish	.30	.33
Family promotes English	.07	.19
English acquisition activity	.43	.22
Bilingualism valued	.26	.11
Use of English media	.08	.07

* $p < .05$

Correlations between the components of the nurturance feature and children’s motivation measures (see Table 2) indicated that connectedness was strongly related to how much children value reading $r = .60$, $p < .01$. In addition, values and identity related to self concept: $r = .50$, $p < .05$. Results indicate that the more time a family spends together, the more the children value reading, and that as families promote values and identity, children’s self-concept as reader also increases. The other components of nurturance did not relate to motivation to read.

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients Between Ecocultural Components of Nurturance and Children’s Perceptions of Their Motivation to Read

ECOCULTURAL COMPONENTS OF NURTURANCE	SELF CONCEPT	VALUE READING
Family involved in future	.13	.14
Family encouragement	.19	.36
Connectedness	.13	.60**
Emotionally affective	.08	.23
Values and identity	.50*	.23

* $p < .05$
 ** $p < .01$

Correlations between the components of the ecocultural feature culture and language and children’s motivation measures (see Table 3) indicated that religious literacy activity related to children’s self-concept as readers ($r = .49$, $p < .05$). This finding indicates that the more a family involves children in literacy-related religious activities, the better the children think of themselves as readers.

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* $p < .05$

Discussion

Ecocultural features derived from our analysis of families’ daily routines provided additional insight into the reading motivation of Latina/o English learners. While a focus on literacy practices can provide us with useful information, examination of ecocultural features provides a view of how daily living processes relate to literacy development, and how these processes are socially, culturally, and historically situated in children’s lives. Motivation theories need to broaden their scope from cognitive paradigms to broader comprehensive frameworks which include the child within her/his context. Cognition can no longer be understood as divorced from the context in which it occurs, or separate from the circumstances and the

interactions of those involved (Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzó, & Arzubiaga, 2001).

The advantage of such a broadened approach is that it allows us to avoid the kind of deficit thinking that has evolved into an underclass model (Hurtado, 1995), and instead favors empirically-derived, dynamic ways of understanding, measuring, and approaching diversity. Trait-based thinking about diversity in the home overlooks important differences within stratified groups. Findings suggest that certain ecocultural features help families mediate opportunities and provide children with activities leading to reading engagement.

One obvious weakness of our study is that it uses a measure of reading motivation which is based on a cognitive paradigm, and not on more recently-developed views of the engaged reader as a motivated, knowledgeable, strategic, and socially-interactive individual (Baker et al., 1996). The Gambrell et al. Reading Survey measures the child's motivation, but does not assess their knowledge, strategies, and social interactions. Observations of children might lead to a more comprehensive measure of their actual motivation in the broader sociocultural sense. In fact, teacher ratings of children according to a more comprehensive definition of engagement have yielded interesting findings (see Rueda et al., 2001).

Nonetheless, our findings indicate one possible way of thinking about the implications of an ecocultural approach for research, policy, and practice of teaching. We would advise caution, however, because the findings are based on a small group of families.

First, in regard to diversity, it seems clear that teaching research may gain additional insight by using a sociocultural lens, instead of a categorical approach to difference. Moreover, regardless of the increasing diversity of the U.S. population, teaching research which addresses diversity in terms of how people live, and not simply in terms of an extraneous characteristic of only some ethnicities, is likely to improve our understanding of how all children learn. Much can be gained by understanding diversity as the expression of numerous culturally-, historically-, and socially-mediated processes.

Second, policymakers interested in preserving the family can use this approach to tailor their policies as much as possible to the population they aim to benefit. For instance, our finding that a family's workload was inversely related to their children's value of reading suggest that policies which lighten a family's workload (such as subsidized childcare or financial assistance for domestic appliances) might have a positive effect on child's reading motivation.

Third, findings can inform schools' decisions on family support. Teachers and school counselors, when confronted with a child who exhibits low reading achievement or problem behavior during reading activities may sometimes turn to the family for answers. However, a family systems approach will fall short if it does not also consider how the family is balancing the resources and constraints of its environment with the daily tasks and practices that constitute the child's daily routine. An examination of family relationships may address some of the pressing issues, but cannot appreciate the extent to which families are also functioning within a specific community or neighborhood. Activities which seem unrelated but are occurring

during a child's daily routine—such as family dinners, which promote a family's spending time together—need to be supported.

Conclusion

The work reported here suggests the important impact that ecocultural family features can have on reading engagement—specifically on children's self-concept as readers, and on the value they place on reading. Accordingly, we have argued that in order to truly understand how and why some children appear motivated and strategic as readers, research in this area must begin to conceive of motivation constructs as products of sociocultural and historical phenomena. Paradigms that attempt to explain complex processes such as motivation to read by looking solely at the individual are limited. We have shown how an ecocultural approach can provide information on sociocultural dimensions that need to be considered.

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