

Supporting Spanish Language Literacy: Latino Children and Free Reading Resources in Schools

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Abstract

This study attempts to describe the issues which affect availability of free-reading materials in Spanish in elementary and middle school libraries. Attention was given to documenting the processes and chains of events which result in the actual library collections in selected elementary and middle schools in the Greater Los Angeles area. Nine school libraries were visited to examine current collections and patterns of use as well as implementation of district policies. Secondly, public libraries closest to each school site were examined in order to determine their role in providing language minority children with free-reading materials.

Conclusions were drawn as to the effectiveness of the school library in providing language minority children with access to reading materials in their primary language, and whether the needs of language minority children can be met through use of existing reading resources in the schools and in the community at large. Implications for primary language literacy development are discussed.

Introduction

A limited English proficient (LEP) student has been defined as “a student whose native language is other than English and whose skills in listening to, speaking, reading, or writing English are such that he/she derives little benefit from regular school instruction” (Hopstock, Rudes, Fleischman, Zehler, Shaycott, Goldsamt, Bauman, Burkheimer, & Ratner, 1984). In the past four years the number of LEP students in the United States increased by 36.2% (Olsen, 1991). These students, enrolled in various educational programs throughout the country, will require more than traditional English-only instruction to allow them equal access to schooling. While there is much debate over the various types of bilingual education, research has shown that effective bilingual programs have the following characteristics: subject matter instruction in the native language, first language (L1) literacy development and comprehensible input in English (Krashen & Biber, 1988). It is a point of agreement among bilingual education experts that literacy

instruction in L1 builds an underlying and conceptual proficiency strongly related to second language (L2) development. This interdependence principle postulates that instruction effective in promoting proficiency in L1 will result in its transfer to L2 provided that there is adequate exposure and motivation to learn L2 (Cummins, 1981).

Although much effort has been spent on bilingual education programs and research as to their effectiveness, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the issue of availability of free-reading materials in languages other than English in school and public libraries. Schon (1983, 1984, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1987, 1988, 1989) has published numerous articles recommending and commenting on selected Spanish language publications for children and adolescents, but literature specifically dealing with availability and access is exceedingly scarce. Dyer and Robertson-Kozan (1983), in their article dealing with library services for Spanish speakers, call for greater attention to the issue of library availability, yet do not address either school district library policy or market availability of such materials. However, they do make the important point that due to the comparative lesser availability of publications in languages other than English outside the schools, the school library takes on a more important role, as access to primary language reading material for many language minority children "may be limited to what the [school] library has on hand" (p. 29).

Given the support for free-reading from the fields of literacy and psycholinguistics (Krashen, 1985, 1987, 1988; Goodman, 1986; Smith, 1986, 1988), in addition to the support for primary language literacy development in bilingual education (Cummins, 1981, 1989), the importance of providing children with access to books in their native language seems evident. Moreover, reading in the primary language may have positive effects on the reading attitudes of language minority students (Cummins, 1979; Schon, Hopkins, & Davis, 1982).

The primary purpose of this study, therefore, was to better describe and understand the issues which affect book availability in languages other than English in elementary school and public libraries. Attention was given to documenting the processes and chains of events which result in the actual library collections in selected elementary schools in the Los Angeles area. Schools libraries were investigated to examine implementation of district policies. Moreover, public library collections of children's books in

Spanish were examined in order to determine their role in providing language minority children with free-reading materials. Conclusions are drawn as the responsibility of the school library in providing Latino children with access to reading materials in their primary language, and whether school libraries are in fact meeting the need.

Methodology

The chosen method is a naturalistic “case study” analysis of the reading resources available to Latino children in nine elementary and middle schools in the Greater Los Angeles area. Data collection involved interviewing library aides, teachers, bilingual coordinators, administrators, and children in the schools. Furthermore, documents produced by the school districts and state of California specifically dealing with school libraries were analyzed. Finally, public libraries in the immediate vicinity of the schools were visited and their collections of children’s books in Spanish were counted. Thus, data from multiple sources was collected with a view to determining the forces and policies which shape the availability of Spanish language books for children in Los Angeles school and public libraries.

Setting

Historically, California has always been a land of cultural diversity; however, it is currently becoming more so, largely due to immigration and the increasing popularity of Los Angeles as a “first port of entry” to the United States. The 1990 census reported that six million Californians had been born outside of the United States, nearly 20% of the population (Berman, Chambers, Gandara, McLaughlin, Miniucci, Nelson, Olsen, & Parrish, 1992). Cultural diversity is easily visible both on the street and in the workplace; but nowhere is it more visible than in our classrooms.

This study is situated in greater Los Angeles, a large urban area with a population of approximately eight million. The large metropolitan school district involved in the study is one of the largest in the country; it has a student population of about 640,000 and employs over 36,000 teachers, counselors, librarians, nurses and psychologists (Los Angeles Times, April 5, 1992). The district has 430 elementary schools. The student enrollment includes 433,681 students reported as LEP; 304,444 of these are at the elementary (K-6) level (California Department of Education, 1991). The comparison districts are also in greater Los Angeles area, but in

a smaller communities, one in close proximity to Los Angeles International Airport, and the other in a small seaside community. Both districts are appreciably smaller than the large metropolitan district.

Results

State and district policies were examined to determine the chain of responsibility in providing LEP students with library materials. Through an examination of the California Educational Code (1977) as well as in consultation with library services personnel in Sacramento (Haclett, 1992), it was found that the State provides very few guidelines for elementary library services, and none specifically dealing with LEP children. Rather, most of the decision-making power in this realm is left in the hands of the individual school districts. An examination of three districts in the study revealed that while the two smaller districts have no policy, the large metropolitan district has extensively delineated guidelines, and recommends that the number of books in non-English languages be equal in proportion to the number of children receiving reading instruction in that language (O'Brian, Reich, Saraci, Wilson, Cohn, Roberstson, & Weisman, 1989). This district also provides resource guides and book lists; schools are obligated to buy their reading resources from this list and may not buy non-approved materials with funding targeted for libraries (Los Angeles County Office of Education, 1991). Table 1 shows the number of books in languages other than English which are approved for purchase by the district during the 1992-93 school year.

Table 1
Approved number of books in large metropolitan district

Language	Fiction	Non-fiction	Total
Korean	17	2	19
Spanish	864	370	1234
Vietnamese	18	1	19
Chinese	68	38	106

The School Library Collections

Nine school libraries were examined. Seven of these libraries were part of the large metropolitan district, which has an office of

library and media services, while the others were located in the two smaller districts which provide no such services. All schools have significant Latino populations, ranging from 30-98%, with LEP levels in the range of 35-88%. Table 2 reports enrollment of Latino and LEP children. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the schools in this study.

Library collections for in the nine schools were examined. Results show that there is a limited number of Spanish books in all nine school libraries. Table 3 reports the holdings of the nine school libraries.

In order to give a clearer picture of the number of books per child, and the number of Spanish language books per L1 Spanish speaker, a breakdown of these numbers was done. First, the number of books was divided by the number of children attending the school. Second, the number of books in Spanish was divided by the exact number of L1 Spanish speakers at each site. Table 4 reports the results of these calculations.

Table 2
School enrollment for the nine schools

School	Total Enrollment	Spanish L1 (%)	Number Asian L1 Students	% LEP
Loma	2350	95%	50	80
Estrella	1237	98%	10	82
Alvarado	2300	90%	217	82
Lilly Ave.	430	30%	45	35
86th St.	1500	65%	—	65
Homer Middle	2600	85%	200	70
Arapaho Middle	2800	92%	120	70
Harbor	375	55%	5	50
Cedar	1280	88%	15	69

Table 3
School library holdings

School	Total Holdings	Books English	Books Spanish	% Spanish
Loma	5343	4030	1300	24.0
Estrella	4418	3449	969	22.0
Alvarado	5000	3875	1000	20.0
Lilly Ave.	2000	1906	82	4.0
86th St.	5000	4000	1000	20.0
Homer Middle	10000	9875	90	0.9
Arapaho Mid	9000	8700	300	3.0
Harbor	9536	8410	1126	13.0
Cedar	6720	5570	1150	17.0

Table 4
Breakdown of books per child in the nine schools

School	Number Holdings Per Child	Number Holdings Per L1 Spanish Child
Loma	2.3	0.60
Estrella	3.6	0.80
Alvarado	2.2	0.50
Lilly Ave.	4.7	0.60
86th St.	3.3	1.00
Homer Middle	3.9	0.04
Arapaho Middle	3.2	0.12
Harbor	25.4	5.50
Cedar	5.3	1.00

As can be noted from the Table 4, the majority of the school library collections in the large metropolitan district, as well as Cedar's collection do not even arrive at one Spanish language title per L1 Spanish student. Furthermore, it should be noted that this calculation is based on the entire Spanish collection, which includes reference books and encyclopedias. Harbor School, in our comparison seaside district has the largest number of Spanish books

per L1 Spanish speaker. However several different factors must be considered here. First, the total number of Spanish books included in this library inventory include class sets of basals and core literature. Second, this library had the highest number of “readers” such as *Biblioteca Básica*. Last, being a “two-way” immersion school, these books are also used by L2 Spanish speakers, something unlikely to happen at any of the other schools in this study.

Patterns of Library Use

Patterns of whole-class use during school hours in the libraries is remarkably similar. In all nine libraries, teachers sign their classes up for a block of time, ranging from a half hour to forty-five minutes. The frequency of sign-up times among teachers who regularly bring their students to the library range from once a week to once a month, with twice monthly being the most frequent. Of course, there are some teachers in each school who never bring their students to the library. Most of these teachers at the elementary level were from the upper (5-6) grades. The librarian at Arapaho Middle School reported that very few teachers bring their classes in regularly, and of those who do, most are English as a second language (ESL) teachers. The only elementary teacher who was available for comment on this issue was a fifth-grade teacher at Estrella School, who claimed his children went to the public library, although not as a class, and that the collection in the school library was at best “uninspiring.” At Arapaho Middle School the teacher who taught language arts in the primary language, given only to children who score at a second grade reading level on the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) Español, does not take the kids to the library because “they do not speak English and there is nothing there for them.”

The half-hour to forty-five minutes of scheduled “library time” is at all elementary schools a rather frantic scene. This is the designated period in which children are allowed to browse and check-out books for free-reading. At Cedar, students are expected to assemble quietly for the first ten minutes as the instructional aide calls out the children’s names, takes back their books and allows them to start browsing for new books. There is a similar procedure at the other elementary schools, although it is primarily the teacher who oversees this process. After this is completed, the room erupts into

a flurry of activity, as children actively browse around the library trying to make good choices in the remaining time.

A variety of classes and grade levels were observed during their half-hour checking-out period. Spanish books were mainly checked out by the primary grade children who were in Spanish reading. As the children got older, they tended to check out fewer and fewer Spanish books. Due to the segregation of the Spanish collections at most of the schools, the activity in that section of the library was easily observable. For example, it was observed that not one child checked-out, or even examined any of Cedar's or Harbor's *Biblioteca Básica* books, but that they clamored eagerly around the collection of newer books. It was also noticed that a class of third-grade Latino children who were in an English-only program at Loma did not check out any Spanish books, although two of them lingered in the section for a few minutes browsing and chatting to each other in Spanish. Comments such as "why don't they have any new books" were heard several times, particularly at Loma and Alvarado, the schools with the largest populations. Very few upper grades came in as a class; of those who did, few children checked out books in Spanish.

Libraries at all schools have limits as to the number of books children are allowed to check out. Only two books at any one time may be checked out by an individual at any of the elementary schools. Alvarado's limit is one per child. The limit at both the middle schools was three books per child every two weeks. All schools have this type of rule, although the degree of enforcement varies. At Cedar and Alvarado it is strictly enforced. The aides feel that if the children were allowed to check out as much as they wanted, the number of Spanish books available at any one time in the library would be very low, and that the tendency for children to lose books would increase. As one teacher at the school put it, "if my kids could come in here and check out as much as they wanted whenever they wanted, they'd decimate the collection within a week." Neither of the Spanish collections in these schools arrive at one book per native Spanish-speaking child, and the number of English books is not much larger. In addition, it was observed at five of seven elementary schools that when children came to the library without having returned borrowed books they were not permitted to check out any others.

At Alvarado the atmosphere about checking out books was particularly tense, and the children's activity was noticeably

regimented. Children browse the bookshelves holding a ruler, which they use to mark the place where they remove a book in order to examine it. They are not allowed to walk back to their table with the book. Rather, they must stand near the shelf look at it there, deciding if they wish to check it out. Once children have chosen their books they go immediately to check them out and then sit quietly at their assigned seats. Many of them start reading, and finish their book before the end of the allotted library time is up. When this happens they are *not* allowed to return the book and check out another. In fact, one third grade teacher was overheard strongly advising the children “not to read.”

A few children in one class demonstrated “el truco” (the trick) to beating the system. They sat down at their round table and proceeded to pass their books to the right, reading their classmates choices instead of their own, “saving” their book for later. Of course, as they pointed out, “el truco” only works if the other kids have not already read the books their classmates have checked out. Ironically, the principal at this school reported that boxes containing “hundreds of library books” are being stored due to the fact that the library, which is quite large, has run out of shelf space. They had been planning to buy more shelving for three years.

At the other elementary schools, in most instances children who already had books out were allowed to check out more. The aide at Estrella commented that she bent the rules frequently, especially if it was a child she knew well, one that was “a real regular” at the library. There were no restrictions at any school except Alvarado as to the number of books over time that a student was allowed to check out. That is to say, if the child finishes his/her two books the next day, s/he can return them and check out two more. That is, if they have the opportunity to use the library this soon.

Public Libraries Near the Schools

An inquiry into the availability of children’s books in Spanish at the public libraries nearest these schools found that resources in these facilities were also extremely limited. Table 5 reports the results of this inquiry.

Table 5
Children's books in Spanish in public
libraries nearest each school site

Public library	Number Children's Books in Spanish	Comics and magazines available?
near Loma	approx. 2500	no
near Estrella	500-700	no
near Alvarado	approx. 2500	no
near Homer	same as Alvarado	no
near Arapaho	250	no
near 86th St.	approx. 900	no
near Lilly. lib #1	225	no
near Lilly, lib #2	approx. 425	no
near Harbor	approx. 375	no
near Cedar	1390	yes
Downtown L.A.	1250	yes

Children's Reported Sources of Free-reading Materials

The library situation, both school and public, is particularly significant when we analyze where children at these schools obtain their free-reading materials. 159 children from the nine schools were interviewed regarding reading interests and sources of free-reading materials. Children were interviewed both in groups and individually. Specifically, they were asked to identify their primary source of free-reading materials. Sources of reading materials are reported in Table 6.

Table 6
Primary sources of free-reading materials.

Source	Percentage of children reporting this source	Number of children
School library	71.70	114
Public library	18.87	30
teacher	6.29	10
parents	3.14	5

As can be noted from the Table 6, the school library serves as the main source of books for the children. Children who reported the public library as their primary source for books were mainly from Cedar and Alvarado, where the public library is located in fairly close proximity to the school. In the case of Cedar, it is sometimes visited by whole classes. In addition, students who reported their teacher as the primary source are all from one class at Cedar, whose teacher was in a position to receive a large number of sample books from various publishers. Thus, it can be concluded that the school library is the primary source of free-reading materials for students interviewed in the schools in the large metropolitan district, as well as, for many of the students at Cedar and Harbor.

Discussion

The access provided Latino LEP children to free-reading materials is not consistent with district articulations which affirm that “all languages and cultures are perceived as valuable and of equal status” (O’Brian et al., 1989). Rather, the policy restrictions imposed upon the acquisition of books in languages other than English in the large metropolitan district, as well as the low priority placed on school libraries at all schools in this study, only seem to maintain existing inequalities in the education of language minority students. Even if all elementary schools in the metropolitan district had books in proportion to the number of “Spanish readers,” as guidelines in this district stipulate, there is an implicit assumption that a child who is “transitioning” or “transitioned,” as well as one who has been designated “fluent-English proficient” has no desire, need or right to read something interest-appropriate in her/his first language. This is a policy which is unsound both in terms of research in bilingual education and bilingualism (see Cummins, 1989), as well as a clear case of structural inequality within our educational system. In fact, the most recent research in the area of bilingual education (Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991a, 1991b) suggests that children in late-exit programs, that is, children who spend a greater amount of time developing literacy in their native language perform better academically in the long term. Therefore, greater efforts to provide children with enjoyable materials in their primary language are of extreme importance to both first and second language literacy development.

Conclusions

Although there has been notable effort on the part of scholars such as Schon, as well as on the part of district offices, to provide bibliographic references to books in languages other than English, school library holdings are far from adequate. Results of this study show that the school library holdings of Spanish reading materials are far below what even the bare minimum would warrant. Furthermore, in the case of the large metropolitan district, it seems that policy restriction of only allowing book purchases from a limited predetermined list (see Table 1) acts as a blockage to the acquisition of adequate reading resources for language minority children. That the school library possesses adequate holdings of books in the primary languages of its students is particularly crucial, as these students depend greatly on the library to provide them with free-reading materials. Eighty-nine percent of the 159 Latino students interviewed in this study reported either the school (71.7%) or public (18.9%) library as their primary source of free-reading materials.

As has been demonstrated, sources of books in languages other than English in the community are relatively scarce, especially when compared with the out-of-school availability afforded students whose primary language is English. Not only is there an inadequate number of books at the public facilities, but books available for purchase are also few and expensive. A survey of booksellers in the Los Angeles area (Pucci, 1990) indicated that when children's materials are available in non-English languages, prices are typically 20-200% higher than their English counterparts.

Thus the school library must assume an even greater responsibility in the reading development of the language minority student, and make a firm commitment to providing adequate resources. In turn, this commitment must evidence itself in terms of tangible resources, as well as thoughtful policies. The importance of free-reading is abundantly supported in the literature, it is up to schools to translate this into a practice which guarantees students access to a variety of reading materials not only in English, but in their primary languages as well.

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