



Variability in Community Characteristics and Spanish-Speaking Children's Home Language and Literacy Opportunities

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Drawing on data from 14 communities in California and Texas, this paper examines the variability in language and literacy resources across communities with large numbers of Latino families. Spanish-speaking children live in communities that vary considerably with respect to language use, ethnic composition and education levels. Children's community experiences vary with respect to exposure to English and Spanish and in terms of access to print materials in one or both languages. Immigrant Spanish-speaking families residing in these communities also demonstrate variation with respect to home literacy practices. However, community-level characteristics only modestly predict a few aspects of children's language and literacy experiences. While this suggests that community characteristics can influence children's language and literacy opportunities (relative to Spanish-speaking children in other communities), the weak associations also show that educators should not presume to know children's home language and literacy experiences based on observable community characteristics. Overall, school-related literacy was the most common and frequent type of literacy activity in the home across communities. Schools provided literacy materials and activities to families in communities where they were lacking, thereby helping compensate for an overall scarcity of literacy opportunities for children in the low-income communities in which they resided.

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Introduction

Growth of the immigrant population in the USA has been unprecedented over the past 15 years. In 2004 the estimated foreign-born population in the USA surpassed 34 million, more than three times the number in 1970 (Capps *et al.*, 2005). Latin American immigration in particular has risen dramatically. A century ago, immigrants from Latin America made up less than 1% of immigrants to the USA; today they make up over 50% (Larsen, 2004; Macías, 2000). In the south-western states of California, Texas and New Mexico,

Spanish speakers currently make up over one fourth of the population (US Census Ranking Tables, 2002). In all, 40 million Latinos – nearly 14% of the total population – live in the USA (US Census Bureau, 2004).

As a result of the immigration influx, the number of students in US schools who do not speak English fluently has grown dramatically. The challenge of understanding this population more fully is particularly important for schools. The contentious debate over how best to educate the country's Spanish-speaking students has been almost completely dominated by arguments over language of instruction, the so-called 'bilingual education debate' (Crawford, 1999; Goldenberg, 1996). But we must also attend to other factors, such as the characteristics of communities in which children live and go to school, as these have implications for academic outcomes (Gephart, 1997; Rothstein, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For children of immigrants growing up in bilingual settings in particular, the language(s) children hear and see in their communities and the availability of different types of literacy materials in different languages have the potential to influence their language and literacy development. This is the focus of the present paper.

Diversity Among the US Latino Population

A recent Census Bureau report about the US Hispanic Population (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000) claims to discuss variability within the heterogeneous group labelled 'Hispanics'; however, the report focuses on generalisations about Hispanics and categorical contrasts between 'Hispanics' and 'non-Hispanic whites'. The only explicit discussion of variability is with regard to adult educational attainment. The diversity of the US Latino population is undoubtedly more complex than these data indicate. As the Latino population continues to grow and has an increasingly greater impact on US society and its institutions, we must look beyond superficial generalisations in order to understand the varieties of experiences and backgrounds Latinos bring to the social fabric of the USA.

Researchers who have focused on home and community contexts of Latino children typically study children from a single community (e.g. Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Del Valle, 2005; Farr, 1994; Guerra, 1998; Mercado, 2005; Roca, 2005; Valdés, 1996; Vasquez *et al.*, 1994; Zentella, 1997). These studies provide in-depth descriptions of home and community literacy and language practices, identifying the social and linguistic resources used by Spanish-speaking families as they raise and school their children in the USA. Contrary to the generalised depiction of poor achievement among Latinos (e.g. Institute of Education Sciences, 2005), achievement outcomes vary greatly for these students. Children from Spanish-speaking homes demonstrate a wide range of achievement outcomes, from very poor to excellent throughout K-12 and into college (Reese *et al.*, 2000a; Zarate & Gallimore, 2005).

A comparative approach is necessary, however, for examining whether and how differences in communities might contribute to variations in children's learning opportunities and achievement. For example, Neuman and Celano (2001) found wide differences in the availability of literacy materials and opportunities across four highly contrasting (non-immigrant English-speaking)

communities. Not surprisingly, the lower-income communities offered fewer materials and fewer public places fostering use of literacy than did the higher-income community. In a similar study of literacy resources in two neighbourhoods with Latino residents, Reese and Goldenberg (2006) found that the higher SES neighbourhood offered significantly more in the way of literacy materials and resources in English, but the lower SES community offered more opportunities for use of literacy materials and resources in Spanish. These studies did not directly connect community literacy opportunities with measured reading achievement, yet both identified many of the ways in which diverse communities afford children dramatically different opportunities for literacy development.

Context of the Present Study

This paper reports a one-year study involving 14 schools and their surrounding communities in Texas and California. These communities, defined as school attendance areas, were located in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, two large metropolitan areas in Texas and a smaller urban area with semi-rural sections along the Texas–Mexico border. The study included 632 Spanish-speaking students in grades K-2 in different types of instructional programmes for English learners (e.g. transitional bilingual, dual immersion and structured English immersion programmes).

We focus on variations in family and community factors that have the potential to influence Spanish-speaking children's language and literacy development and address the following questions:

- What is the range of community language and literacy characteristics in different communities?
- Is variation in community characteristics associated with children's language and literacy experiences?
- What is the role of the school as a language and literacy resource and/or mediator between communities and families?

Our past work with Latino children and families has been guided by activity theory (Gallimore *et al.*, 1993; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985) in which everyday family activity settings (e.g. dinner time, visits with relatives, after school activities, Bible study) are a key unit of analysis for understanding the lived culture of each family. Home activity settings are partly determined by the surrounding environment, partly constructed by the families in accordance with personal and cultural schemas (Reese *et al.*, 1995, 2000b). In examining the literacy practices in which families engage, we examine not only activities involving use of text, but also the cultural values, attitudes, feelings and relationships that shape and give meaning to those events (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1993). We expect that variations in community availability of textual material in Spanish and English will influence the frequency and nature of literacy activities and interactions around print in the home. Variations in family literacy practices are important, at least in part, because they are

associated with variations in children's reading performance in school (Jeynes, 2003, 2005). This connection is not explored empirically in this study. Rather, our focus is on understanding the relationships between community and family variations in Spanish-speaking children's language and literacy experiences and the role of the school as a moderator of that relationship.

Methods

Site selection

Schools selected for study had at least a 40% Latino enrolment overall and at least 30% Spanish-speaking ELL enrolment in grades K and 1. Fourteen schools (and their surrounding communities) were included in the study: 7 in urban Texas, 4 in border Texas and 3 in urban Southern California. Schools employed a range of language programmes (three types of bilingual education and all-English instruction). Investigators selected schools with relatively high levels of achievement within their respective language programme category, based on state-mandated testing results that were publicly available (see Reese *et al.*, 2006, for more details on sample construction). Thus we make no claim that schools in our sample are representative of schools with substantial numbers of Spanish-speaking children.

We used complementary qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative methods allowed us to describe the range and frequency of literacy practices across families and communities; qualitative methods permitted more nuanced explorations of how and why these practices were carried out.

Parent survey

Parents were surveyed using a written questionnaire sent home through the child's classroom teacher. Of the 830 parents we attempted to survey, 632 (76%) returned the survey forms. The survey included questions on a range of family sociodemographics, and language and literacy practices.

Responses were on a Likert scale. Items asked about the language(s) used for specific purposes (e.g. parents speaking to the child) used a 1 (only Spanish) to 5 (only English) scale, and frequency of literacy activities (e.g. how often parents read) used a 5- or 6-point scale ('never' or 'almost never' to 'daily' or 'more than daily'). Child language with mother, father and other adults in the home were combined (averaged) to form the scale 'Child language with adults'.

Interviews with informant families

A subset of families at each school participated in three home interviews lasting approximately 90–120 minutes each. Project-trained interviewers were bilingual; most were themselves first- or second-generation Latino immigrants. The interviews focused on family language and literacy practices, attitudes and materials. Also included was information on parents' education, length of time in the local community, their participation in church and other

community organisations, and their use of reading and writing on the job. We also gathered detailed data about the children's daily activities outside of school and the opportunities that families reported for children's participation in literacy activities of different types. Seventy-two families in the 14 school communities participated in in-depth interviews.

School Attendance Area Survey (SAAS)

Project investigators conducted a survey of the school attendance neighbourhood in order to assess languages heard and observed in different neighbourhood settings; literacy materials of various types (e.g. books, newspapers, fliers); and environmental print. The observation team drove or walked each street in the neighbourhood and stopped to observe key areas (e.g. parks, stores, recreation centre). Observational data were recorded on precoded forms as well as on open-ended field notes. The precoded survey forms included detailed counts and global ratings of community characteristics such as SES and ethnic heterogeneity. Field notes and coded survey protocols were augmented by photos and video footage.

US Census

The US Census was used to provide demographic data on population density, education levels, family income, ethnic concentration, home ownership and language use for the census tract in which the school was located.

Sample Description

Communities

Table 1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the 14 communities in the pilot study. The communities varied along every dimension, including economic and ethnic heterogeneity.

Some communities fit the stereotype of the classic *barrio* (Meléndez, 1998): overwhelmingly Latino, low income and densely populated. On the other extreme are more affluent suburban communities with ample parks and recreational facilities and where English use predominates. Yet other communities are in located in spread out, semi-rural areas on the outskirts of the nearest city, where families raise chickens and bayous cut through the neighbourhood. A few of the communities are located along the USA–Mexico border, and residents regularly cross the border to shop, visit relatives and attend church.

Although there is considerable variability across the communities, there are also similarities. Most of the Hispanic population in the communities is of Mexican background, and the use of Mexican Spanish predominates. In addition, while the SES variation at the community level is great, the Spanish-speaking families in our sample that live in higher or mixed SES communities tend to be among the lower-income families within their respective communities. Overall, as we see next, families tend to have low levels of income and parent education.

Table 1 Community characteristics^a ($n = 14$)

	<i>Mean (sd)</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
Population density (inhabitants/mile ²) (Cen)	6,672 (8,505)	494	33,004
% population < HS diploma (Cen)	44.8 (19.3)	16.4	78.9
% population BA or higher (Cen)	13.9 (13.5)	1.8	46.6
SES heterogeneity (4 = high) (SAAS)	2.2 (.9)	1	3
% below poverty line (Cen)	25.8 (13.9)	10.8	57.6
Median household income (Cen) ^b (\$)	31,886 (10,727)	10,000	43,935
Median household income – Latino (Cen) ^b (\$)	29,684 (10,364)	9,612	49,412
% Latino (Cen)	67.0 (25.5)	30.4	98.7
Ethnic heterogeneity (4 = high) (SAAS)	2.0 (.9)	1	4
% Latino foreign born (Cen)	41.5 (11.9)	26.3	61.9
% owner-occupied housing units (Cen)	54.8 (20.1)	22.6	81.5
% owner-occupied housing units – Latino (Cen)	50.4 (22.7)	9.2	80.0

^aData sources: Cen, Census tract data; SAAS, School Attendance Area Survey

^bUnadjusted for cost of living

Families

Table 2 provides an overview of education, income and birthplace of the families in our sample. The sample is largely immigrant, with low levels of income and formal schooling. Of the parents born outside the USA, the majority immigrated to the USA between the ages of 14 and 18. Families averaged 3 children per family; about 20% of households have mothers as single parents. (These last data are not shown in the table.)

Community Language and Literacy Characteristics and Resources Available for Families

Communities offered varying opportunities for children to hear, see and use both English and Spanish for a variety of purposes (see Table 3).

The communities in this study demonstrated a range of oral and written English and Spanish use, as Table 3 shows. Language use in the community was strongly associated with ethnicity and socioeconomic status, variables reported in Table 1. The correlation between percentage of the population that speaks Spanish, but speaks English not well or at all, and percentage of the population that is Hispanic is 0.82 ($p < 0.0001$); correlation between percentage of the population that speaks Spanish, but speaks English not well or at all,

Table 2 Family characteristics^a (n = 632)

	<i>% of total sample</i>	<i>Range</i>
Fathers < HS diploma	73.3	No formal schooling (3.0%) to graduate study (1.1%)
Fathers BA or higher	4.3	
Mothers < HS diploma	68.1	No formal schooling (2.6%) to graduate study (1.2%)
Mothers BA or higher	4.2	
Families with income < \$30,000	80.4	< \$10K (20.5) to > \$60K (2.2%)
Fathers foreign-born	86.9	Other countries of origin, in order of frequency: El Salvador, Guatemala, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, other (not named)
Fathers born in Mexico	75.4	
Mothers foreign-born	85.1	
Mothers born in Mexico	74.4	
Child foreign-born	19.9	
Child born in Mexico	18.8	

^aSource: parent survey

and percentage of the population below the poverty line is 0.77 ($p < 0.001$). Poverty rate and Hispanic population are correlated at 0.79 ($p < 0.001$).

There were no communities in our sample in which English was the only language heard. In contrast there was one community in which only Spanish was heard and two in which Spanish was the predominant language heard. In the Perrier community, located in border Texas and including the downtown section of town, the school population is 99% Hispanic. Spanish was the only language heard during the community observation (see Figure 1). The downtown sector had numerous stores – 33 clothing stores on one street alone. Some of these had Spanish names, such as *Los 4 Reyes*, while others had English names (*East Coast*).

On the other end of the spectrum were communities in which mostly English was heard in community locales and only English was seen in the commercial and service signs. For example, Wesley is an eclectic community located in a large central Texas city. Bordering on the historical part of town and typified by gentrification efforts, it includes a range of housing types and conditions as well as a variety of commercial enterprises. All of the signs, including that of one of the two bookstores observed in the 14 participating communities, were in English. Most common were communities, such as the California community of Cooper, in which both languages were heard, and in which both languages appeared in signage, with English predominating (Figure 2).

Environmental print (commercial and service establishment signs, posters, fliers and forms) was found in all communities. Church services representing at least one denomination were available in all communities and typically presented opportunities for some literacy access through bulletins, Bibles,

Table 3 Language across the communities^a

	n	Mean (sd)	Minimum	Maximum
% population speaking English only (Cen)	14	34.4 (22.9)	4.0	65.0
% population speaking Spanish; speak English not well or at all (Cen)	14	20.6 (12.7)	9.0	48.0
Language heard by child in parks ^b (PI)	9	2.7 (0.8)	2.3	3.7
Language heard by child shopping ^b (PI)	9	3.0 (0.7)	2.3	3.3
Language heard by child in church, with relatives ^b (PI)	9	1.9 (0.8)	1.3	2.6
Language heard by child with babysitter, others ^b (PI)	9	2.8 (1.0)	2.3	3.8
Language most commonly heard ^b (SAAS; single item)	12	2.9 (1.0)	1	4
Language most commonly seen on social service signs ^b (SAAS; single item)	14	3.6 (1.1)	2	5
Language most commonly seen on commercial signs ^b (SAAS)	14	3.9 (0.9)	1.7	5.0

^aData sources: Cen, Census tract data; SAAS, School Attendance Area Survey; PI, parent interview

^bScale for language variables: 1, all Spanish; 2, mostly Spanish; 3, both; 4, mostly English; 5, all English

hymnals, song sheets and posted announcements. Churches, as institutions that offer services in Spanish as well as English, might serve to facilitate Spanish maintenance as well as promote the reading of religious texts (Figure 3). Although in the predominantly English-speaking community of Garden families had to go outside of the immediate area to attend mass in Spanish, other communities offered both Catholic churches as well as smaller evangelical churches in or nearby the areas where the families lived. All of these churches offered services either in Spanish exclusively (in the case of some of the smaller churches) or in both languages.

Access to books through public libraries or commercial outlets was variable but generally limited in both Spanish and English. Only one community had both a public library and a bookstore. One community had a library, and another had one bookstore; eleven had neither. In the Garden library, books in Spanish were limited to a small area along one of the back shelves and constituted a very small percentage of the total books available for circulation. Families reported some access to materials in English at major chain drug stores and grocery stores when these establishments were available in their community. The smaller mom-and-pop type stores more characteristic of these neighbourhoods had very limited, if any, literacy material for sale.

We expected to find associations between community characteristics and home practices, e.g. prevalence of English in the communities and English use



Figure 1 Spanish signage in the Perrier community



Figure 2 Predominantly English signage in the Cooper community



Figure 3 Church services available in Spanish in the majority of communities

in the homes; availability of English or Spanish reading material in the communities and correspondingly more English or Spanish reading reported by families. In the section below, we examine these associations.

Community Characteristics and Children's Language and Literacy Experiences

Parent survey and interview data reveal that children's language and literacy experiences and opportunities varied from community to community. Table 4 summarises the variability across the 14 communities with respect to children's language and literacy experiences. All but two variables – frequency of parents' reading and frequency of child reading on his/her own – differ significantly across the communities, indicating that children experience different levels of literacy and different mixes of English and Spanish use depending upon the community in which they live. The magnitude of these differences is fairly modest, as indicated by the partial η^2 values. The η^2 statistic describes the proportion of total variability in a variable (e.g. child language with adults) that is attributable to a particular factor, which in this case is community. For example, language use among the target child and adults in the home varies significantly across communities (significant F ratio in second column, Table 4), and that community accounts for 9.4% of the variance in this variable (partial η^2 in third column). Other variables shown in the table have smaller or larger η^2 values, indicating that

Table 4 Variability in language and literacy experiences across communities

	F (df = 13)	Partial η^2
Language use ^a		
Language used among child and adults in the home	4.871***	0.094
Language used among child and children in the home	5.267***	0.103
Language child uses with children outside the home	8.657***	0.157
Literacy (no language specified)		
Frequency of M, F reading	ns	–
Frequency of child reading on own	ns	–
Number of children’s books in the home	3.223***	0.076
Number of adult books in the home	2.889**	0.085
How often does someone take child to the library	4.335***	0.086
Language of literacy		
Language in which parents read	5.049***	0.108
Frequency of adult or older sibling ^b . . .		
Read/look at books with child in Spanish	7.012***	0.134
Read/look at books with child in English	2.353*	0.050
Tell a story in Spanish	2.407*	0.051
Tell a story in English	3.050***	0.065

^aFor all language variables: 1, all Spanish; 2, mostly Spanish; 3, both; 4, mostly English; 5, all English

^bExcluding child’s homework

*** $p < 0.0001$; ** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.01$

community is a less or more important potential influence on children’s experiences with respect to that particular variable. This section elaborates these findings.

Language use by children and adults

Although this is a predominantly Spanish-speaking sample, parent reports suggest language variations across the sites; that is, children in different communities experience a different mix of English and Spanish in their environments (see ‘Language use’ in Table 4). These differences varied by conversational partner, however, as Table 4 shows. Language use in the home varied across communities but not as much as children’s language with other children outside the home did. The partial η^2 of 0.157 in Table 4 shows more variability in child language with friends outside the home as compared to variability in language use inside the house, either with adults or other children.

Parents reported adult use of both languages, but much more Spanish than English. The mean rating on language spoken among children and adults was 1.7, indicating mostly Spanish use. In contrast, language use among children was more variable and more weighted toward use of both English and Spanish. Among children in the home, the mean was 2.4; with children outside of the home, the mean was 2.8. Both were significantly different from language use with adults in the home – $t(611) = 22.174, p < 0.0001$ for children in the home and $t(619) = 24.629, p < 0.0001$ for children outside the home – and significantly different from each other – $t(606) = 10.832, p < 0.0001$.

In sum, children's language use with children outside of the home is more variable across communities than is language use either with adults or with children in the home. In addition, children – both in and out of the home – speak more English among themselves than do children and adults.

Literacy use

Children in different communities have varying literacy experiences, although this variability is not evident across all of the literacy practices families reported. There is no significant variability across communities with respect to frequency of parents' reading and frequency of the child's reading on his/her own. There is modest variability in books in the home (for children and adults), trips to the library, reading/looking at books in English and the child hearing stories in English or Spanish. The most literacy-related variability across communities was observed in language of parents' reading and frequency of reading or looking at books with the child in Spanish.

Figure 4 shows a box plot of parents' reading frequency (no significant variability across communities) and Figure 5 shows a plot of adult or older sibling reading/looking at books in Spanish (significant variability across communities). The boxes depict the middle 50% of the cases within each community, from the 25th to the 75th percentile, based on parents' reports. Outlier scores (values between 1.5 and 3 box lengths from the upper or lower edge of the box) are represented by circles. As the plots illustrate, frequency of parents' reading of books, magazines and newspapers is consistent across communities, whereas frequency of reading to the child in Spanish is much more prevalent in some communities than it is in others.

The box plots in Figures 4 and 5 also reveal two other findings. First, the overall level of reported literacy activity is modest. On average, parents report reading a book, magazine or newspaper about 1–2 times/week. Similarly, average frequency of reading or looking at books with children (in Spanish), although far more variable across the communities, is also roughly once per week. Second, there is considerable variability *within* the communities. Although parents' average reading clusters in the middle range of the scale (Figure 4), observed values span the entire or nearly entire range in most of the communities. Reading to the child in Spanish is more variable across communities, but again, the entire or nearly entire range of the scale can be observed in most of the communities.

Despite the variability, there are some consistencies across families. Reading to children and observing children engage in attempts to read and write was

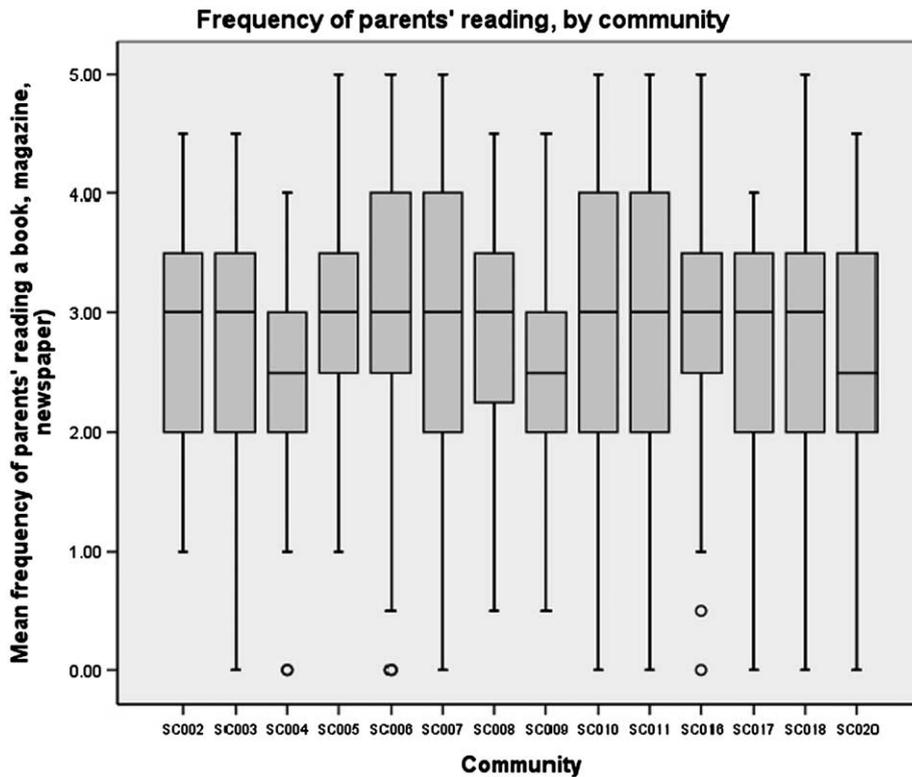


Figure 4 Box-plot of parents’ reading frequency, by community. 0, Never; 1, < 1 × / month; 2, 1–2 × /month; 3, 1–2 × /week; 4, almost daily; 5, > 1 × /day
 Source: Parent survey

common across all sites. All of the families (100%) interviewed described ways in which their children attempted to use literacy – from writing the names of family members, reading labels on containers in the grocery store, to asking their parents to read to them. Ninety-six percent of the families reported reading to their children and 92.8% reported doing so on a frequent basis (daily or a few times a week). In addition, 88% reported reading to their children before the children entered kindergarten.

Literacy activities by domain

Literacy use by families for a variety of purposes was discussed with families during the face-to-face interviews. In Table 5, reported frequencies of reading are reported for the sample of 9 communities (*n* = 72 families) in which in-depth interviews were carried out.

As Table 5 indicates, school-related literacy was the most common and frequent type of literacy activity in the home. School-related literacy involved reading to the child as required by the school (e.g. homework and homework directions) and reading letters and fliers from school. Other forms of literacy were also reported: Household literacy included reading bills and writing

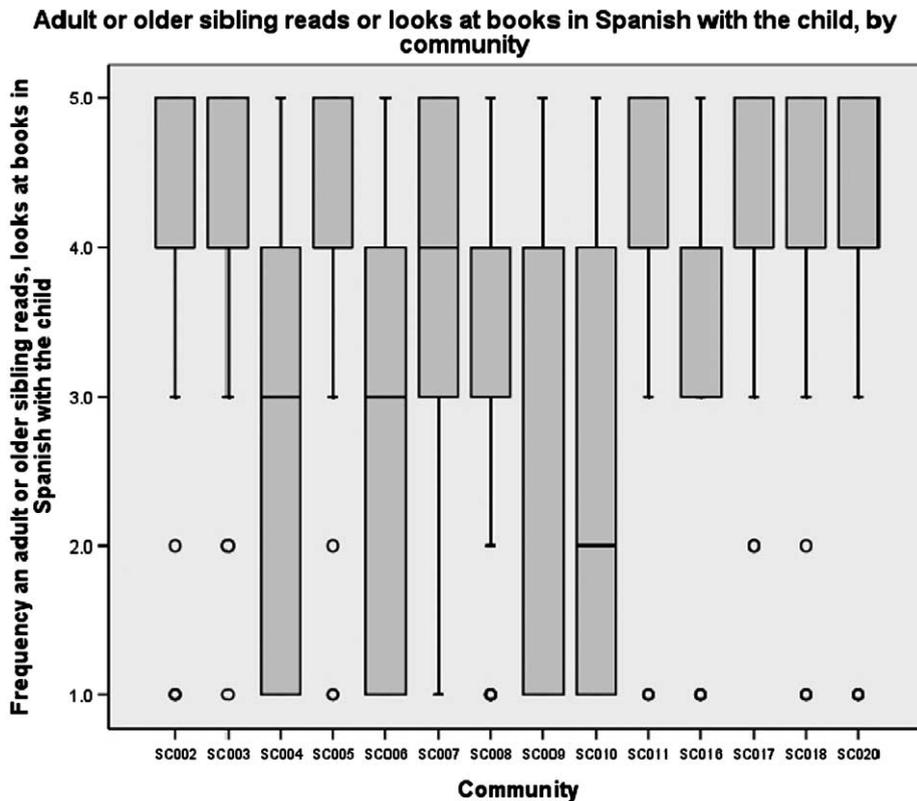


Figure 5.1, Almost never; 2, 1 × /month; 3, 2–3 × /month; 4, 1–2 × /week; 5, daily
 Source: Parent survey

shopping lists. Religious literacy consisted of reading the Bible or religious texts. Entertainment involved reading novels or magazines for pleasure.

Overall, adult reading was not reported to be as frequent an occurrence as reading by children. Adult literacy practices were also much more variable. Adult literacy use in a single community ranged from very little reading by adults to the use of literacy on a daily basis and for a variety of purposes such as household chores, church, work-related, school-related or entertainment. Parents' jobs represent one area in which very different literacy demands were placed on parents. For example, one father, a gardener with no formal schooling, was unable to read, unable to give directions to his home for the first project interview and reported engaging in no reading or writing on the job. In contrast, a father who was an electrical engineer reported using literacy on his job on a daily basis, writing reports and reading informational articles.

Variability in reported literacy use by family members other than the target child is associated with parent education levels. Mean parents' years of formal schooling predicted household newspaper reading ($r = 0.27$; $p < 0.05$), reading for entertainment ($r = 0.38$; $p < 0.001$), work-related literacy ($r = 0.32$; $p < 0.01$) and reading for household tasks ($r = 0.29$; $p < 0.05$). Other literacy activities,

Table 5 Home reading activities^a

<i>Domain</i>	<i>% yes household</i>	<i>% yes mothers</i>	<i>% yes fathers</i>	<i>Mean frequency^b</i>	<i>% daily</i>	<i>% few times/week</i>
School	98.6	94.4	34.7	3.3	38.2	50.0
Household	80.6	78.3	8.7	2.9	7.4	72.2
Religion	68.1	62.0	31.0	2.9	25.6	46.5
Newspaper	59.7	34.3	42.9	3.1	26.7	63.3
Letters	59.7	50.7	18.8	2.1	8.6	14.3
Work	51.4	29.0	30.4	3.0	38.1	28.6
Entertainment	45.8	32.9	18.6	2.5	8.7	47.8

^aData source: parent interview

^bMean frequency for person with highest percentage reading reported; scale 1–4 (few times/year; few times/month; few times/week; daily)

such as letter writing and reading for religious purposes, were not associated with parents' education level.

Community characteristics and children's language and literacy experiences

To what extent are the varied community characteristics we have documented associated with variations in children's language and literacy opportunities and experiences? Correlations between community level characteristics and children's language and learning opportunities are reported in Table 6.

As Table 6 shows, there are some modest associations, specifically, community poverty, Latino population, and language use and education level in the community predict aspects of children's home language and literacy experiences. These findings indicate that increased community-level poverty is associated with children speaking more Spanish and, correspondingly, less English. A greater Latino presence in the community is associated with more Spanish (and less English) use among children and also with less reading by children, fewer children's books in the home and fewer trips to the library. On the other hand, more English in the community is associated with more English (and less Spanish) use among children, more reading by children, more children's books and more frequent trips to the library. Higher levels of education in the community are associated with more books for adults and children in the home; conversely, lower levels of education are associated with fewer books for adults and children.

Many family-level variables – e.g. children's language use with parents, parents literacy practices, and literacy activities involving children and older siblings or adults – are not associated with community characteristics measured in this study. That is, while these features of home life varied across the communities (Table 4), they did not necessarily show a systematic association with identifiable community characteristics.

School as a Literacy Resource and/or Mediator Between Communities and Families

Although we observed variability with respect to some literacy opportunities across the communities, the magnitude was fairly modest. Indeed, other data sources point to consistencies across the communities. To attempt to explain consistencies in reported children's reading practices across sites, we examined the role of the school as a community literacy resource, and therefore, a moderator of variability across the communities. In addition to simply requiring homework, schools also served as a literacy resource for families in a variety of ways. Some opened their school libraries for parent use and book checkout. It is probably due to the school library access that most parents across sites, when asked about access to books in their community, stated that it was relatively easy to obtain books despite the lack of commercial access to print material. This might help explain the finding reported in Table 4 that there was no significant cross-community variability in frequency of children reading on their own. Despite considerable differences in community literacy resources, the schools played an equalising role, making children's literacy materials available in communities where otherwise they would not have been.

In addition to making the school libraries available for family – and especially children's – use, principals at two schools described how they actively brokered increasing access to books in community locales. One principal worked with the local library to increase their collection of books in Spanish, and another principal worked on a collaborative project with city personnel to establish online access to text materials in Spanish at the nearby Boys and Girls Club. These efforts, and the decision to open the school libraries, extend beyond the more commonplace efforts to foster home reading through school-wide book clubs and required reading homework that typify home–school connections at all of the schools.

Several schools also expanded their role to serve as community resources beyond facilitation of access to books. For example, Wellings School offered adult literacy classes in Spanish and/or English, adult education classes such as computer literacy and family literacy programmes. Thus, perhaps due to the impact of homework and fostering reading through library access, the school appears to have mitigated variability across communities in children's home literacy experiences and opportunities.

Discussion

A social constructivist perspective of literacy suggests that literacy acquisition is an on-going process that begins in the home and is influenced by active engagement in meaningful reading and writing activities. Opportunities to see, speak, read and write in English and/or Spanish in a variety of settings and for a variety of functions in the community have the potential to influence families' daily literacy practices and children's literacy acquisition.

The children in this study had varying opportunities to gain familiarity and practice with print both in their homes and communities. In the community, differences in exposure to literacy opportunities were noted in the availability

Table 6 Correlations between community characteristics and child/family language and literacy experiences

		<i>Child language with friends outside of house^a</i>	<i>Child reads on own</i>	<i>Number of adult books</i>	<i>Number of children's books</i>	<i>How often someone takes child to library^b</i>
Percent of population in poverty (Census)	Pearson corr	- 0.157***				
	N	620				
Percent of population that is Latino (Census)	Pearson corr	- 0.178***	- 0.124**		- 0.175***	- 0.119**
	N	620	611		526	613
Language heard in the community (SAAS)	Pearson corr	0.208***	0.100*		0.158***	0.116**
	N	525	518		453	519
Percent of population with BA or higher (Census)	Pearson corr			0.207***	0.131**	
	N			420	526	

^aAll language variables scored English = high

^bAlmost never' to 'daily'

of environmental print and texts in English and Spanish. However, community differences had only a weak association with child literacy opportunities, such as books or reading in the home. Access to reading material (aside from what was provided by the school) was limited overall, especially for families living in the lower-income areas where few books and magazines were available for purchase in local stores. This limited range might help explain the weak association between community characteristics and home literacy opportunities. In any case, families did not perceive a lack of availability of print material and did not say it limited the number and type of literacy activities in which they participated.

Access to opportunities for oral language use in both English and Spanish also varied across communities. In some communities, such as Garden, access to English-speaking peers in the neighbourhood was associated with more English use by the target children with other children outside of the home. However, this access does not appear to ensure more English use, as with the case with the Burcham families. The difference may be due in part to the difference in the geography and composition of the community. In the Garden community,

Latino families were scattered throughout the ethnically diverse community, whereas in the Burcham community Latino families were segregated from the English-speaking families and college students in the community.

Finally, schools appeared to impact literacy practices in the home in several ways. Through homework assignments, schools required home reading by children that was reported by parents to occur on a regular basis. In addition to homework completed by children, all of the parents reported engaging themselves in literacy activity associated with school demands by reading letters and fliers from school as well as homework instructions. The schools in our study extended their role to include adult classes and provided access by parents to the school library. Thus, these findings illustrate how the school can help offset the low levels of literacy materials and opportunities that children experience.

Overall, we observed considerable variation in community and family characteristics likely to be implicated in children's language and literacy development – language use in the community and the home, literacy opportunities in the community, frequency of literacy use in the home and the types or domains of functional literacy uses in which children participate or have an opportunity to observe. This variation defies attempts to make broad generalisations about home language and literacy practices for Latinos as a whole, as is often done with Latino cultural values (e.g. Marshall, 2002). Indeed, it is this variability, both within and across sites, that is one of the major findings of the study. A question we are exploring in analyses currently underway is the relationship between this variability and children's language and literacy development. At the same time, our findings to date also indicate that community contexts do not predetermine the kinds of literacy practices that take place in local homes. This variation within the communities suggests we cannot judge any particular child's home language and literacy experiences based on the community in which she or he lives. For teachers, this message should be welcomed. Even in low-income and ethnically isolated communities, literacy practices are carried out in homes by a variety of family members, and the school can play a key role in promoting children's opportunities for productive home experiences with print.

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