Language Minority Students and Public Library Use in the United States

Jeff McQuillan

ABSTRACT. Research has consistently found that school and public library use are positively correlated with reading achievement. This study examines differences in public library use among a nationally representative sample of parents. It was found that children from homes where a language other than English is spoken use the public library significantly less than children in English-only speaking homes, but that these differences are no longer present when parental education is taken into account. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]*

There is abundant research showing that children who read for pleasure do better in measures of literacy (Krashen, 1993). Since school and public libraries are major sources of books for students, it is therefore not surprising that the size and quality of school and public libraries are significant predictors of reading and academic achievement at both the elementary and secondary levels in the United States (Lance, Welborn, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993; Krashen, 1995; McQuillan, 1996). In a series of ethnographic and small sample studies, Constantino (1993, 1994, 1995) found, however, that language minority parents and students often use the school and public libraries considerably less than English-only speakers. The present report seeks to confirm Constantino's findings and to see if they can be generalized to the U.S. population as a whole.

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METHOD

The U.S. Department of Education, using a random sample of American parents with children ages three to nine, collected information on indicators of school readiness as part of the National Household Education Survey. The survey resulted in over six thousand interviews with parents, and included questions pertaining to library use. The survey data files were obtained in electronic format from the National Center for Educational Statistics for analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the results on library use by parents by the mother's first language. The difference among the three groups is statistically significant (Chi-square = 25.96, df = 2, $p < .0001$). The results support Constantino's findings, particularly concerning Spanish-speaking parents.

Other research suggests that socio-economic status (SES) is also an important predictor of some literacy practices and subsequently of reading achievement (Morrow, 1983), perhaps even more important than first language (Kennedy & Park, 1994). Table 2 shows the breakdown of library use by parents' level of education.

There were no statistical differences among language groups at either the "high school or less" or the "beyond high school" categories, although the difference for "high school or less" tended toward significance (Chi-square = 5.36, df = 2, $p = .06$; Chi-square = 1.19, df = 2, $p = .38$).

TABLE 1. Took Child to the Library During the Past Month by Mother's First Language (n = 6050)

First Language Spoken by Mother	
English	50% (n = 2670)
Spanish	37.5% (n = 165)
Asian or Other	52% (n = 149)

TABLE 2. Took Child to the Library During the Past Month by Mother's First Language and Parents' Level of Education (n = 6050)

Education level	English	Spanish	Asian/Other
High school or less	36% (n = 706)	30% (n = 86)	40% (n = 33)
Beyond high school	60% (n = 3389)	52% (n = 79)	57% (n = 116)

DISCUSSION

In general, then, the data confirm that SES factors appear more important than first language in distinguishing literacy practices among parents. However, since Spanish speaking parents fall disproportionately in lower SES levels in the United States (65% have a high school degree or less, compared to 36% of English only speakers), Spanish-speaking households are much less likely to have access to books, and therefore less opportunities to further literacy development. The results reported here provide further support for the notion that both school and public libraries must make special efforts to reach out to language minority parents and their children.

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