

## RESEARCH REPORT

### **A Case Study of the Experiences and Perspectives of Hispanic Immigrant Parents on Heritage Language Maintenance and Bilingual Education in the Rural Community of Brandon, Manitoba**

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This qualitative embedded case study investigated the experiences and perspectives of 16 first-generation Hispanic immigrant parents on heritage language maintenance and bilingual education in the City of Brandon, Manitoba. I conducted 5 individual face-to-face semistructured interviews followed by three focus group interviews with 11 Hispanic immigrant parents. The participants were divided into two subunits of analysis: Colombian, Honduran, and Salvadoran (CHS); and non-Colombian, non-Honduran, and non-Salvadoran (non-CHS).

The study first examined the views that Hispanic immigrant parents have about the maintenance of Spanish among their children. Second, the study identified the difficulties that Hispanic immigrant parents experienced in their efforts to preserve Spanish as the heritage language. Third, the research identified strategies that Hispanic immigrant parents used in their homes to help their children to preserve Spanish. Fourth, the research examined power relations reflected in the experiences of Hispanic parents in their interactions with the school and examined how the nature of these relations impacts the home language maintenance among children. Finally, the study described the parents' perspectives of how school authorities, teachers, and the community can support them in preserving their native language and making informed decisions regarding heritage language maintenance and bilingual education.

The main research question was "How do Hispanic immigrant parents in the City of Brandon view their experiences with the issue of heritage language maintenance and bilingual education?" To explore this inquiry in detail the following sub-questions were addressed:

1. How do Hispanic immigrant parents perceive the maintenance of Spanish as heritage language?
2. What Hispanic immigrant parents view as challenges and/or difficulties in their effort to preserve Spanish as heritage language?
3. How do Hispanic immigrant parents perceive their relationship with their children's school and how the nature of this relationship impacts the home language maintenance among Hispanic immigrant children?
4. What are some strategies that Hispanic immigrant parents are using in their homes to help their children to preserve Spanish as their native language?
5. What are parents' perspectives of how the school's authorities, teachers, and the community can support them in preserving the native language of their children and in making informed decisions regarding heritage language maintenance and bilingual education?

### **Results**

All of the Hispanic immigrant parents participating in this study viewed the preservation of Spanish as fundamental in the development of their children, and they wanted their children to maintain the Spanish language, the Hispanic cultural values, and identity. In general, despite the challenges to maintain the home language, a few parents were succeeding in raising their children bilingually while a majority was not.

All parents considered crucial the maintenance of Spanish as the home language because they perceived their language as an essential key to fostering a sense of unity, continuity, and understanding not only among the members of their nuclear and extended family but also among the Hispanic community. Most Hispanic immigrant parents were resisting assimilative pressures by implementing practices and strategies to preserve their native language at home.

Parents in this study also viewed the bilingual ability of their children as a human capital that allows children to maintain strong family ties and serves as a door opener and as a valuable tool for achieving academic and professional success.

The CHS immigrant parents perceived the maintenance of the home language as a fundamental value for their Hispanic identity and as a means for the economic success of their children in the mainstream society. The non-CHS participants shared a similar view about the preservation of the home language by their children; however, these parents placed a major emphasis on the value of bilingualism as a medium for academic achievement.

The CHS participants were less aware of the cognitive advantages of bilingualism and heritage language preservation in comparison to the non-CHS participants. This awareness is a fundamental factor in maintaining their children's mother tongue because parental attitudes influence the way that children perceive cultural manifestations such language and traditions.

The research found that the role of the children as language brokers was a strong factor that positively influenced the attitude of CHS immigrant parents toward the preservation of the home language. However, the pressures that this role has in children and the repercussions of intrafamilial conflicts, separation, and family disruption because of the immigration process were perceived as factors that negatively influence the home language maintenance.

All but one participant considered their native language as a fundamental and distinctive component of the Hispanic culture. CHS and non-CHS parents recognized the link between language maintenance and identity. However, the perception that the Spanish language is a determinant aspect of Hispanic identity was stronger in the CHS parents. As immigrants, CHS and non-CHS parents were aware that the future of their children lies in Canada; thus, they perceived the preservation of Hispanic identity as a form of empowerment in their new context.

CHS and non-CHS parents faced challenges in helping their children to maintain Spanish. The findings suggest that, due to socio-economic conditions, language barrier, and low Spanish literacy, parents who came to the city associated with the recruitment process started by Maple Leaf Foods were having more difficulties in preserving their home language, than the non-CHS parents who came to Brandon for other reasons. By the time of the interview, two of the five CHS participants were working at Maple Leaf Foods. Findings evidenced that the heavy workload is another challenge that affects the parents' efforts to preserve the home language.

These working parents felt that they had very little connection with their children's school. They did not feel that their knowledge and human capital was perceived as valuable for the education of their children inside of the school. Both groups saw as barriers the lack of bilingual and heritage language programming and the difficulty to access printed bilingual resources. Also, CHS parents reported challenges associated with assimilative pressures from the schools, heavy workload, and economic limitations as factors affecting language preservation, while non-CHS parents did not report these concerns.

Based on parents' perceptions of the level of mother tongue language maintenance achieved by their children, it could be argued that higher educational background and better socio-economic status of parents are factors affecting the home language preservation positively among Hispanic children in Brandon. Families who had moved furthest up the socio-economic ladder had been the least successful in maintaining Spanish.

A significant finding in this study was a possible correlation between the low parent-school/teacher partnership and the low level of Spanish maintenance reported by parents. Parents who had a closer and more collaborative relationship with teachers and school perceived that the chance to discuss instructional plans and the advice from teachers and

school personnel aided them to make informed decisions that favored language preservation and bilingualism of their children. In contrast, parents who perceived a distant relationship with their children's school and experienced more assimilative pressures in detriment of their native language reported a higher level of language attrition in their children.

Most of the participants consciously used strategies to preserve the home language. Few parents enforced a Spanish-only policy; most applied more flexible ways to encourage children to maintain the home language. Common strategies included using Spanish at home, having a home library with Spanish and bilingual books, reading and writing in Spanish, using positive reinforcement, listening to Hispanic music, and watching Spanish TV programs in a family time.

All of the participants perceived that schools and community could support their efforts by having bilingual and heritage language formal instruction in the city and by including Hispanic children's home language and culture in school curriculums. Parents also perceived that schools could help them by leading strategies to promote bilingual and heritage language awareness among immigrant parents and children in the city.

### **Recommendations**

Teachers can choose to reproduce historical patterns of exclusion in their classrooms, or to embrace a collaborative relationship of power toward the empowerment of marginalized linguistic minorities. In their daily interactions with Hispanic immigrant children and other linguistic minorities, teachers need to recognize and build on the various forms of vernacular literacy that are manifested in the ethnocultural communities of these students.

Educators must be aware that power relations have an active role in the success or failure of Hispanic immigrant children who are growing up in the multilingual context of Brandon. These children belong to a linguistic, social, and cultural ethnic minority that has historically been marginalized and subordinated within the school system. Classroom educators must question coercive relations of power reflected in the wider society that communicate messages that diminish students' value, their language and culture, their worth as individuals, and their academic potential. Teachers should challenge these negative assumptions and communicate a different message by valuing children's home language and by treating immigrant children as linguistically talented individuals from the first day they arrive at the school.

In instructing Hispanic immigrant children, educators need to evaluate what image of the child they are sketching in their instruction. These children need to get from their teachers the messages that they are capable of becoming bilingual and biliterate, developing higher order thinking and intellectual accomplishments, using their creative and imaginative thinking, creating literature and art, generating new knowledge, and thinking about and finding solutions to the social issues that affect their families, their community, and their society. If these Hispanic immigrant children are not getting these messages from their interaction with their teachers and school, then they are not developing an identity of competence in their new context.

Educators need to consider the psycholinguistics dimensions of teaching through the native language of linguistic minority children, and develop literacy through both languages. They need to recognize the benefits that the first language has for academic development, but also the sociological dimensions that imply connecting instruction with children's lives and affirming their identities. Literacy engagement is a powerful determinant of the extent which literacy skills are developed in school. To engage Hispanic immigrant students with literacy, teachers need to support students in getting access to literacy in both the native and the mainstream language.

Hispanic immigrant children will benefit if teachers include in their classrooms content that is familiar or relevant to their context. In the Brandon, teachers must be aware of the social implications that the process of immigration has for the families and children who came to the city linked to Maple Leaf Foods' recruitment of workers. For instance, educators need to know that many of these immigrant children have the huge responsibility to be the voice of their

parents as interpreters and translators while sometimes witnessing conflicts that have severe emotional repercussions for them.

The use of dual books in both, Spanish and English is a powerful teaching strategy that has enormous impact in the lives of these students. While creating these bilingual books, students enhance their academic writing, reading, metalinguistic, and socio-cultural awareness – among many other skills. Their creation of bilingual or multilingual literature helps to solve the problem of the absence of bilingual literacy resources in schools and communities. These dual books can also become in a repository of a community's cultural knowledge if the immigrant children write in the dominant language during their school time and then go back and work with their parents to produce with home language versions.

Finally, teachers can change the predominant monolingual appearance of schools. They can make schools into places where the first thing students see when they walk in are signs in the multiple languages that prevail in the community, and where they can see their bilingual or multilingual works showcased in the corridors.

By adopting a collaborative position, teachers can support Hispanic immigrant parents in their efforts to preserve the home language by giving students home activities and work that require interaction with parents through the home language. Teachers can also encourage Hispanic immigrant parents to take part in classroom activities, fundraising events, or evening sessions where they come in and read with their children in their home language and English.

Policymakers should be aware that Spanish in Brandon is not a simple code of communication, but a language that relates to the culture, identity, and socio-economic struggles of a vulnerable population, most of whose members came to this city to work under challenging conditions. The way that the concept of “heritage language” is used in policy documents, the efficacy of the Policy for Heritage Language Instruction, and the requirements for its implementation in rural communities such as Brandon need to be reviewed. These policies and the curriculum proposed for the Spanish language need to be adapted to the needs of all the members of the Hispanic community.

As educators, we need to look at both the sociological and psycholinguistic implications of preserving the home language of immigrant children, and its active inclusion in the school curriculum. We also need to be aware of the historical patterns of exclusion that have led to the school failure of minority linguistic groups in North America, and reverse this exclusion that these communities have faced in the past and still face in the present. The voices of the participants in this study demonstrate the need to reverse the dimensions of schooling that have contributed to the school failure of Hispanic immigrant children in countries such as Canada and the United States. The devaluation of identity, language, culture, and community has been inevitably involved in those dimensions of schooling. These patterns of devaluation can be reversed by challenging the coercive relations of power and promoting a collaborative relationship of power in schools. The empowerment of children from minority linguistic groups can be done by providing them with more opportunities of heritage, bilingual, and multilingual literacy, and by enabling them to develop a powerful identity through affirming and intellectual work, through using their home languages, cultures, and communities in school settings.

### ***About the Researcher***

*Erika Serrano-Hidalgo emigrated from Costa Rica. She holds a degree in Spanish Philology, a Graduate Diploma in Education, and a Master of Education in curriculum and instruction from BU. She has been teaching Spanish at BU since 2009. Erika is also the director of the Manitoba Alliance for International and Heritage Language Education Inc. in Winnipeg.*