

Early Education Challenges and Opportunities with a Focus on Hispanics¹

Eugene Garcia, Ph.D.

The Hispanic population is rapidly growing in the United States. Currently, Hispanic children make up 20% of the nation's young (infant through 8 years old), with about one-fourth of newborns being Hispanic. In a little over 25 years, this percentage is projected to go up to 25%; that is, one out of every four children in the United States will be Hispanic. For New Mexico, current population estimates² show a much greater percentage of Hispanic children:

- for all kids under 5 years of age, 54% are of Hispanic origin;
- likewise, for all kids ages 5-9, 54 % are of Hispanic origin.

It is important for individuals, families, communities and society that Hispanic children's school readiness and school achievement are at their best. However, this is currently not the case. Data show that Hispanic children lag far behind their White counterparts in K-12, and subsequently in their college years. This extant situation has far reaching economic and social ramifications, e.g., negatively affecting the work-force (and therefore our economic health), social injustice, and a lack of opportunity for those affected children to participate fully in our society as they move forward in life.

Policymakers can make a difference in closing the achievement gap by improving academic outcomes for Hispanic children in the early childhood years. There are promising approaches for improving education in the primary grades, in prekindergarten, and in programs for infants and toddlers, which can be translated into policy.

How are Hispanic children faring in school readiness and school achievement?

Achievement Gaps at the Elementary School Level

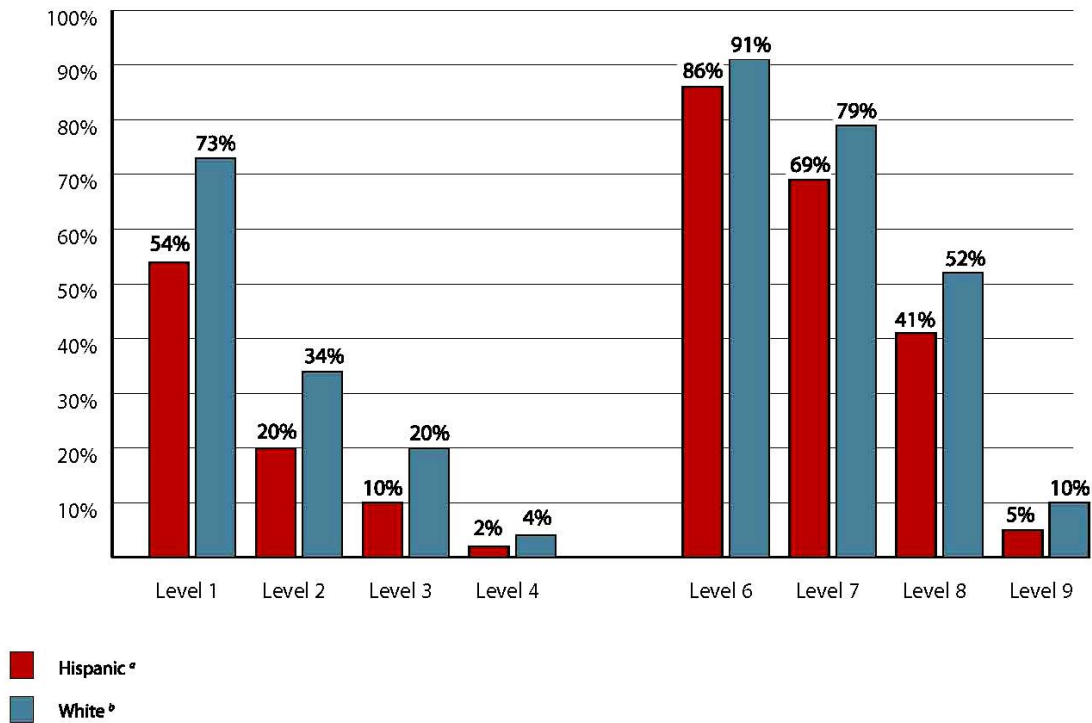
On average, Hispanic students' achievement is at much lower level than Whites across the K-5 years. A recent analysis report, commissioned by the *National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics*, which utilizes data from a large national longitudinal study, reports that:

- compared to their White counterparts, Hispanic children lagged behind on measures of reading and math skills at the start of kindergarten;
- a large achievement gap still persisted in reading and math at the end of the fifth grade; the following figure depicts the reading skills differential gap:

¹The information in this paper highlights selected information contained in the publication, *Para Nuestros Niños: Expanding and Improving Early Education for Hispanics*; any additional information contained herein, not from the *Para Nuestros Niños* report, is otherwise noted. *Para Nuestros Niños* was published March, 2007 by the *National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics* and is available at <http://www.ecehispanic.org>. [Editor's note: Dr. Garcia is the current Chair of the aforementioned task force.]

² University of New Mexico (March, 2007). 2000 to 2006 State and County Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin from the Census Bureau. Available at <http://www.unm.edu/~bber/demo/coestchar.htm>.

Figure 1: Reading Skills at the Start of Kindergarten and at the End of Fifth Grade



Key: Percent scoring at or above each of the following ECLS-K reading proficiency levels for K-5 years^c

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| Level 1: Recognition of letters | Level 6: Literal inference from words in text |
| Level 2: Understanding beginning sounds of words | Level 7: Extrapolating from text to derive meaning |
| Level 3: Understanding ending sounds of words | Level 8: Evaluating and interpreting beyond text |
| Level 4: Sight recognition of words | Level 9: Evaluating nonfiction |
| Level 5: Comprehension of words in context | |

^a The Hispanic data do not include the 30% of the Hispanic children in the ECLS-K sample that did not have oral English skills strong enough for them to take the English-language reading readiness assessment as they entered kindergarten.

^b The White students in the study were limited to those who were third generation Americans, because they represent the “baseline” group within the White population.

^c Levels defined in Princiotta, D., and Flanagan, K. (2006). Findings from the Fifth-Grade Follow-up of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Source: Reardon, S.F., and Galindo, C. (2006). *Patterns of Hispanic Students’ Math and English Literacy Test Scores. Report to the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics.* Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University.

- social economic status was associated with achievement differences for both Hispanics and Whites (low SES was associated with much lower reading and math achievement); 36% of the Hispanics were in the lowest SES quintile compared to 8% of Whites; 9% of the Hispanics were in the highest quintile compared to 30% of the Whites;

- Mexican American children had the lowest reading and math achievement levels among Hispanic children from the various Hispanic national origin groups;
- intergenerational progress: third generation Mexican Americans had higher reading and math achievement than first and second generation Mexican Americans at the start of kindergarten and across the elementary years (third generation Mexican Americans had stronger family SES profiles than first and second generation Mexican Americans).

Achievement Gaps at the Secondary School Level

Achievement gaps at the secondary level have been shown by other studies as well. One such major study, the Educational Longitudinal Study,³ has shown Hispanics scoring much lower in reading proficiency measures compared to Whites, including within same SES quartiles. In 2003, an international study conducted by the Organization for Economic development (OECD) measuring math literacy, problem solving, reading literacy, and science literacy, found that among 15 year olds, U.S. Hispanics (and African-Americans) scored much lower than Whites and Asian Americans.

Achievement Gaps and English Language Proficiency

In the *Reading Skills at the Start of Kindergarten and at the End of Fifth Grade* figure above regarding the ECLS-K study, it is noted that 30% of the Hispanic children in the sample did not have oral English skills strong enough for them to participate in the assessment when they started kindergarten. Throughout their elementary years, and at the end of the fifth grade, these children were performing far below White children's averages in reading and math *and* below the averages for the other 70% of Hispanic children.

What factors influence school readiness and achievement?

Foundational patterns of school readiness and achievement occur during 0-3 years of age. Families, therefore, play an important role in providing fertile ground for developing positive outcomes for school readiness and achievement. Parenting practices incorporating language and literacy development opportunities (e.g., talking and reading to children, having literacy-related materials in the home) will positively influence the child's reading skills throughout the timeline of his or her school years.

Studies have shown an association between well-educated parents (with college and graduate degrees) and their children having a larger vocabulary and stronger prereading skills at the start of kindergarten (which are predictors for later reading achievement outcomes) compared to children with less well-educated parents.

³ Ingels, S.J., Burns, L.J., Chen, X., Cataldi, E.F., and Charleston, S. (2005). Initial Results from the Base Year of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

When there is a gap on measures of reading readiness, math concepts, and general knowledge at the start of kindergarten, this pattern is entrenched by the end of the third grade. The consequence of the situation of these early years reverberates throughout subsequent elementary and secondary school years, negatively impacting academic progress. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to optimize development opportunities related to school readiness and achievement during the Pre-K through grade 3 years in order to solidify a strong early childhood foundation for academic progress; these early years are critical.

What are some educational strategies to address the achievement gaps?

In light of the influential factors discussed above for school readiness and achievement, the following early education strategies can be employed to address achievement gaps:

- expand access to infant/toddler programs designed for school readiness (e.g., Early Head Start) that serve, or have the potential to serve, Hispanic families. Such programs can expand language and literacy development opportunities. Provide information to Hispanic parents about available programs;
- expand Pre-K access for Hispanic children to increase their enrollment (historically, within the total population of the respective ethnicities, a lower percentage of Hispanic children attend Pre-K programs compared to White children);
- increase the number of bilingual (Spanish and English) teachers and second language acquisition specialists, which can attenuate or eliminate the language barrier (a learning barrier) for children who are not proficient in English when they start school. Also, provide the economic incentives to recruit and maintain well-educated, Pre-K professionals;
- at the K-3 level, incorporate a strong literacy development focus and provide some form of English-plus-Spanish instruction;
- establish/enhance monitoring of the readiness and achievement progress of subpopulations by establishing an information system for Pre-K and kindergarten (and optimally K-3). The system would disaggregate students into subpopulations defined in terms of: race/ethnicity; parent education level; family income; first, second, or third generation status; and primary language spoken in the home.

How can the above strategies be translated into policy (and implementation)?

- Create incentives for the development of relevant professionals in your institutions of higher education.
- Connect the Pre-K sector with the K-3 education sector enhancing joint training opportunities.
- Begin movement towards a universal Pre-K opportunity for all children.