

ACCULTURATION AND ACADEMICS:
EFFECTS OF ACCULTURATION ON READING
ACHIEVEMENT AMONG
MEXICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

Enedina García-Vázquez
New Mexico State University

Abstract

Numerous studies have been conducted on acculturation. These studies include defining, conceptualizing, operationalizing and measuring acculturation. The emphasis of this body of research, however, has been on the acculturation of adults. The process of acculturation occurs among children and adolescents also. In academic settings, students are expected to acculturate to the school and are expected to perform academically like other students. When students are confronted with literacy demands coupled with the multi-faceted, multi-layered process of acculturation, development of literacy skills will be influenced. It is important to determine whether cultural factors influence reading assessment and skills before evaluating other literacy dimensions. Therefore the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of acculturation on reading achievement. Twenty-three 7th through 9th grade Latino students in a small rural midwestern town participated in the project. *The Acculturation Quick Screen* (Collier, 1988) and Franco's (1983) *Children's Acculturation Scale* were used to assess acculturation to the school environment (the former) and their own culture (the latter). Reading scores on the *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* (ITBS) were used as their reading achievement measure. Results of two correlations revealed no significant findings, suggesting that a limited relationship exists between acculturation and reading achievement. Qualitative findings indicated that students could maintain their first culture without significantly affecting reading achievement.

Studies conducted on acculturation have focused on defining, conceptualizing, operationalizing and measuring acculturation (Graves, 1967; Matthiasson, 1968; Olmedo, 1980; Poggie, 1973; Szapocznik, Scopetta, Kurtines, & de los Angeles, 1978). While many definitions have been given for acculturation, Redfield, Lenton and Herskovits' (1936) definition has become most commonly used among researchers. Acculturation is a process

which occurs as the result of first hand contact between autonomous groups leading to changes in the original cultures of either or both of the cultures. In essence, acculturation is a way to describe the adaptation process of diverse individuals to the dominant culture.

Early hypotheses of the process of culture change suggested that individuals would fully integrate or assimilate into one culture, assuming the values, language and traditions of that culture. To assimilate, an individual or group not only assumes the cultural traits of a host society, but also is allowed to participate fully in social, economic, and political arenas. More specifically, assimilation is considered a theory of conformity of immigrant or ethnic minority groups to the dominant group (Appleton, 1983).

Assimilation occurs on two levels: behavioral or cultural assimilation and structural assimilation (Appleton, 1983). Behavioral or cultural assimilation occurs when immigrant or ethnic minority groups take on the values and life styles of the dominant group. The process of acquiring these cultural traits is acculturation. The second level, structural assimilation, is entrance of ethnic minority groups into the social groups, institutions, and organizations of the dominant group (Appleton, 1983). For assimilation to occur, both levels must be present. However, history has shown that the U.S. has maintained its cultural pluralism because individuals from diverse backgrounds have not been fully integrated into the majority culture at the educational, economic or political level. Individuals from ethnic minority groups have attained little power; thus, examining the process of acculturation rather than assimilation becomes a more appropriate approach to describe the process of cultures coming together.

The process of acculturation results in direct lifestyle changes at the individual or group level and is developed in three phases: contact, conflict and adaptation (Padilla, 1980). Contact occurs when two or more autonomous cultural groups interact (Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987, p. 207). In the educational setting contact occurs when children from non-European backgrounds enter school.

Conflict may occur as a result of a group or individual resisting the dominance of another group and is directly related to the level of adaptation created by the groups in contact (Berry, 1980). Conflict results when two opposing belief systems come together, eliciting a struggle of power between two groups. For example, Latino parents may give their child a first name in Spanish to match his or her Spanish surname only to be translated to English when the child enters school. In this example, the parents' rights to name their

child and strengthen the identity of the child as a Latino are challenged by the majority group (Vázquez & García-Vázquez, 1995). As a result the child and parents may experience acculturative stress (Padilla, Alvarez, and Lindholm, 1986). Adaptation may take three forms: adjustment, reaction and withdrawal. In adjustment, the cultural behaviors of the minority group become similar to those of the dominant group in order to reduce conflict (Berry, 1980). These changes could include language, values, customs, and self-identification with the dominant group. The child in school, pressured to conform, may then accept the translated name in order to reduce conflict and feel like a member of the classroom. In the form of reaction, the minority group may experience aggression and disagreement regarding the dominant group's views of culture. Reactions may include forming political groups or organizations to promote the minority group's culture. In the schools, children may resent changing their name and not respond when being called upon.

In withdrawal the ethnic group member withdraws from the dominant group. This occurs in such situations as segregation and the building of isolated communities from the dominant culture. The school-aged child may refuse to go to school. For the most part, however, children do not have the freedom in schools to act independently; conflict, adaptation, and withdrawal will be influenced by environmental and school demands.

While the research on acculturation has focused on the process for adults, acculturation also occurs among children and adolescents. In academic settings, Latino students are expected to acculturate or absorb some of the values, cultural traits, or characteristics of the school; and as a result, students are expected to perform academically like other students. Learning English becomes the first major cultural trait in which students must acculturate in the schools in order to become academically successful. Language has also been found to be highly correlated to acculturation (Keefe & Padilla, 1987). As a result, for many developing bilinguals learning the language of the school becomes critical. The implications in literacy situations cannot be ignored. When students are confronted with literacy demands coupled with the multi-faceted, multi-layered process of acculturation, development of literacy skills may be influenced.

Recently, there has been an increase in concern regarding bilingual children's literacy. Latino students continue to achieve below national norms in literacy (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991). There is a large body of literature related to increasing reading attainment in general, but the bridge between theory and practice appears to be weak for the bilingual child. In the schools,

a student's reading achievement begins with assessment so problems arise even before theory is applied.

Limited research examining the process of culture change in children is available. García-Vázquez and Ehly (1994), studying the effects of acculturation to the school environment on problem solving abilities, found significance only for verbal subtests. More specifically, the authors found that proficiency in English (the language of the test) influenced the results of the test. Therefore students who knew the language of the test performed better, suggesting that students who learn English will do better academically. However, the authors also noted that enhancement of problem solving skills does not have to occur at the expense of a student's culture or language.

Rodríguez (1989), examining the effects of sociocultural factors on academic achievement among Mexican-American students, had inconclusive results. That study indicated that the field is interested in the effects of sociocultural factors on academic achievement and that the research suggests that social and environmental factors play a crucial role in the student's educational potentialities. There is much variance in school achievement among students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. However, the extent to which or if sociocultural variables affect achievement is inconclusive. In his study, Rodríguez (1989) examined the amount of variance in the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT) and Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised (WRAT-R) that could be accounted for by the Sociocultural Scales of the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA) (Mercer & Lewis, 1977).

Rodríguez (1989) found that the amount of variance in the PIAT and the WRAT-R accounted for by sociocultural factors was not significant. The only significance was found in Urban Acculturation and SES factors of the SOMPA, but only in some academic areas.

Given these results and the need for more research examining the effects of acculturation on reading achievement among bilingual students, it is important to determine whether cultural factors influence reading skills. The present study examined the relationship between acculturation and reading achievement.

Methodology

Participants

Students were selected from a small rural town in the midwest, with 21% of the school district population coming from Mexican-American and Asian backgrounds. The Mexican-American population consists of first through third generations while the Asian population were recent immigrants to first generation. Emphasis for this study was with the Latino students in 7th, 8th, and 9th grades. A total of 23 subjects participated, 12 males and 11 females.

Measures

Two instruments measuring acculturation were used. The Acculturation Quick Screen (AQS) is a scale developed to measure a student's adaptation only to the school environment (Collier, 1985). The scale was developed with Padilla's (1980) multidimensional theory as a foundation; it consists of 8 items addressing number of years in the U.S., in the school district, and in ESL or bilingual education classes. A student's Lau category, degree of first and English language proficiency, and ethnicity or nation of origin are also assessed. A student's raw score is transformed into a scale score ranging from 8 (less acculturated) to 40 (more acculturated). Although the instrument was developed from a multidimensional perspective, scores obtained are more consistent with the single-continuum model of acculturation. No validity or reliability data are reported.

The Children's Acculturation Scale (CAS) is a ten-item Likert type scale for Mexican-American students (Franco, 1983). The items assess English proficiency, parents' occupations, language preference and language spoken at home, identification preference, peer associations, education of head of household, music preference and generational level. Test/retest reliability was reported to be .97, internal reliability at .77 and interrater reliability at .93, all significant at the .001 level. Construct validity was assessed against the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans (Cullar, Harris, & Jasso, 1980) yielding a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient of .76, $p < .01$. The CAS, when completed by someone who knows the student, yields a score ranging from 1 (less acculturated) to 5 (more acculturated). Franco (1983) reports that students scoring near 1 tend to be very "Mexican" while those scoring close to 5 tend to be very "Anglicized." Students who score near 3 tend to be bicultural. This scale follows a single-continuum perspective. The reading composite of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Hieronymus, Hoover, & Lindquist, 1986) was used as the reading achievement score. The *Iowa*

Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) is a norm-referenced test typically administered in group format throughout the United States. The authors followed various steps to ensure validity, such as consulting curriculum guides, textbooks, independent reviews, research and others. Reliability coefficients were obtained for the various grade levels, forms, and subtests. For grades 7th-9th, grade equivalent reliability coefficients in reading range from .90 to .92

Procedure

Permission to work with the participants was obtained from the parents and the students. Once this was accomplished, students were pulled out from one of their study hall periods to work with the examiner or with one of two school psychology students in their third year.

While the CAS (Franco, 1983) generally is completed by someone who knows the student being assessed, for this study participants served as their own respondents. The instrument was modified to fit an interview format. Information for the AQS (Collier, 1985) and results of the ITBS were obtained from the students' cumulative folders.

Results

Two correlations were conducted: CAS and ITBS-reading and AQS and ITBS-reading. Plots were also obtained to visually identify the relationships. Results of the correlations revealed no significant findings for acculturation, measured by the CAS and reading, $r=.19$, $p>.05$. Non-significant findings were also noted for AQS and reading, $r=.26$, $p>.05$. The results of the correlations suggest that students with high acculturation levels do not obtain high reading scores.

Examination of the items on the AQS revealed that the participants varied on language proficiency skills and length of residence. Students who were recent immigrants and whose length of residence in U. S. schools was brief demonstrated limited English proficiency. Therefore, the factor that impacted student performance the most was English language proficiency. Students whose contextualized and decontextualized English was better developed obtained higher scores on the reading tests. Interestingly enough, communication skills in Spanish were well developed in all participants. In addition, all students reported some degree of literacy in the first language. Students reported that they often read and wrote letters in Spanish to relatives in other states and in some cases, Mexico.

The score on the CAS was divided into two levels: less acculturated (2-2.7, N=12) and bicultural/more acculturated (2.8-3.7, N=11). This instrument provided a glimpse into the students' cultural awareness and ethnic identification. Other questions on the CAS related to preferred music, friends, foods, language of media exposure, and identification. All students maintained relationships with others from similar backgrounds and less than half preferred relationships with students from other ethnic backgrounds. In school the participants had a tendency to "hang" with each other and relate socially outside of the school environment. All students enjoyed a variety of music, including polkas, cumbias, rap, and new wave. All students ate traditional Mexican food at least once during the day. Students identified with the terms Mexican and Mexican-American more than any other label (e.g. only American, Chicano). In general, the students were highly identified with their Mexican-American background.

Discussion

For many years the American public has been led to believe that to be successful in this country one must be assimilated to the European-American culture and that maintaining one's culture impedes the process and subsequent success. However, this has not held true for ethnic minority groups. In addition, success has been attributed to high levels of acculturation or behavioral/cultural assimilation. The present study examined the effects of acculturation on reading ability. Correlational analyses revealed no significant findings, suggesting that as acculturation increased, performance on a test of reading did not. Phinney (1989), in her review of the literature, indicated that for third and fourth generation individuals acculturation does not have the same impact as for more recent immigrants. She suggests that, because Latinos have been in the U.S. for several generations, the groups have become part of the nation's culture.

Qualitative results revealed that the most salient factor was proficiency in the language of the school. In addition, the results revealed that a student's culture or proficiency in Spanish did not impact reading achievement negatively. The results of the present study suggest that communicative and academic competence in English may contribute more to students' academic success than identification with the first culture. Since all students were to some extent biliterate, the results allude to previous research findings on transfer of language skills (Cummins, 1980). It is possible that students'

skills in reading and writing in Spanish contributed to English proficiency. Further, the results indicate that maintenance of the first culture does not impede success.

Although the current study sheds light on the relationship between culture and achievement, on the average, students from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to perform at a lower level on tests of achievement. One must conclude, then, that there are other factors that have an impact on the academic achievement of students who come from bilingual backgrounds. It is speculated that students' learning styles (e. g. field independence/dependence), self-esteem, instructional methods, styles of teaching, acculturative stress and styles of competition are some factors that may influence students' academic performance; continued research is necessary to examine these factors. In addition, it will be important to determine the extent to which discrimination, whether perceived or real, affects academic achievement.

Limitations of the Study

An obvious limitation was availability of instruments to assess acculturation. Not many instruments have been developed for children and adolescents, and those available follow a single-continuum perspective which in many cases examine only type of acculturation and not degree. In addition, instruments available lack technical adequacy such as reliability and validity.

While the ITBS is technically adequate, a more in-depth assessment of reading skills could be obtained. Use of criterion-referenced and more informal approaches to evaluating reading abilities will provide a more accurate indication of actual reading skills. Assessment of literacy skills in Spanish is also suggested. Rather than relying solely on self-report and acculturation scales, an unedited writing sample, informal reading inventory and use of norm- and criterion-referenced tests in Spanish could enhance the assessment of literacy in Spanish.

Another limitation relates to sample size. While much can be said about the numbers that were obtained in a state that is not highly diverse, the sample could be expanded to include other grade levels in order to increase the power of the analyses. Expanding the range of ages and grades will also help us determine if there is a point at which acculturation makes a difference and where the effects "wash out" in relation to academic performance.

Implications

Results of the current study lend support to the theory that acculturation is multidimensional and composed of a multitude of cultural traits that could be present or absent in one or more cultures (Padilla, 1980). In this case, language had the greatest impact on reading achievement, the extent to which a student had accepted the cultural traits and values of the dominant group notwithstanding. In addition, the instruments used to measure acculturation assessed type of acculturation from a single continuum perspective and not degree of acculturation which follows a multidimensional perspective. Further work to identify the process of culture change from a multidimensional perspective is required.

The multidimensional model will also provide information on other factors such as ethnic identity and perceived discrimination, information that will provide more insight into the various components influencing academic success for bilingual students. Prior to making overall generalizations, cultural traits present or absent in the student's cultures must be determined since any child from a bilingual or monolingual Spanish speaking background will be required to make some adaptations when he or she enters school. Interpretation of test results in reading or other academic areas will need to account for the impact the process of culture change has on the individual child and on the learning process. As children learn, it will be necessary to determine whether the child is experiencing acculturative stress and ascertain whether a child under acculturative stress benefits from instruction as much as one who is not under stress.

For students from bilingual backgrounds it may be important to facilitate the process of adaptation early in their educational experience and then focus on enhancing communicative and cognitive/academic proficiency in the language in which they are instructed and tested. At the same time it is essential to consider other factors such as student learning styles, self-efficacy, instructional programming, and attitudes toward students from ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. To truly understand the experience of bilingual students in schools it will be highly important to establish the extent to which prejudice and discrimination influence students' learning experiences; this is consistent with a multidimensional approach to the process of culture change. For many parents who struggle with the decision of teaching their children the language of the home, the results support the idea that to be successful in school the first language does not have

to be sacrificed. Students can maintain a first language and culture while learning to participate in a second culture. Parents and students from bilingual or monolingual Spanish backgrounds who struggle with identity issues can be assured that becoming literate does not have to come at the expense of one's culture, language, and identity.

References

- Appleton, N. (1983). *Cultural pluralism in education: Theoretical foundations*. New York: Longman.
- Berry, W. (1980). Acculturation as varieties of adaptation. In A. M. Padilla (Ed.), *Acculturation: Theory, models and some new findings* (pp. 9-25). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Collier, C. (1985). Acculturation and education: characteristics of referred and non-referred culturally and linguistically different children. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 46, 2993A.
- Cullar, I., Harris, L. C., & Jasso, R. (1980). An acculturation scale for Mexican American normal and clinical populations. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 2 (3), 199-217.
- Cummins, J. (1980). The entry and exit fallacy in bilingual education. *NABE Journal*, 4 (3), 25-59.
- Franco, J. (1983). An acculturation scale for Mexican-American children. *The Journal of General Psychology*, 108, 175-181.
- García-Vázquez, E. & Ehly, S. W. (1994). Acculturation and intelligence: Effects of acculturation on problem-solving. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 78, 501-502.
- Goldenberg, C., & Gallimore, R. (1991, November). Local knowledge, research knowledge, and educational change: A case study of early Spanish reading improvement. *Educational Researcher*, 2-13.
- Graves, T. D. (1967). Psychological acculturation in a tn-ethnic community. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 23, 337-350.
- Hieronymus, A. N., Hoover, H. D., & Lindquist, E. F. (1986). *Iowa tests of basic skills*. Chicago: The Riverside Publishing Company.
- Keefe, S. E., & Padilla, A. M. (1987). *Chicano ethnicity*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

- Matthiasson, C. W. (1968). The acculturation of Mexican Americans in a midwestern industry. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, New York.
- Mena, F. J., Padilla, A. M., & Maldonado, M. (1987). Acculturative stress and specific coping strategies among immigrant and later generation college students. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 9 (2), 207-225.
- Mercer, J. R., & Lewis, J. F. (1977). *System of multicultural pluralistic assessment*. Cleveland, OH: Psychological Corp.
- Olmedo, E. L. (1980). Quantitative models of acculturation: An overview. In A. M. Padilla (Ed.), *Acculturation: Theory, models and some new findings* (pp. 27-45). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Padilla, A. M., (1980). The role of cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty. In A. M. Padilla, (Ed.) *Acculturation: Theory, models and some new findings*. (pp. 47-84). Boulder Colorado: Westview Press.
- Padilla, A. M., Alvarez, M., & Lindholm, K. 3. (1986). Generational and personality factors as predictors of stress in students. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 8 (3), 275-288.
- Phinney, J. S. (1989). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: A review of research. Paper prepared for the National Institutes of Health.
- Pogge, J. J. (1973). *Between two cultures: The life of an American Mexican*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Redfield, R., Lenton, R., & Herskovits, M. 3. (1936). Memorandum for the study of acculturation. *American Anthropologist*, 38, 149-152.
- Rodriguez, R. F. (1989). The effect of sociocultural factors on the achievement of minority children. In *Education and the Changing Rural Community: Anticipating the 21st Century*; Proceedings of the 1989 ACRES/MRSSC Symposium. Fort Lauderdale, Florida.
- Szapocznik, J., Scopetta, M. A., Kurtines, W., & de los Angeles, M. A. (1978). Theory and measurement of acculturation. *Interamerican Journal of Psychology*, 12, 113-130.
- Vázquez, L. A. & García-Vázquez, E. (1995). Variables of success and stress with Mexican American students. *College Student Journal*, 29 (2), 221-226.