



# 'Spanish at Home, English at School': How Perceptions of Bilingualism Shape Family Language Policies Among Spanish-Speaking Parents of Preschoolers

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**‘Spanish at Home, English at School’:  
How Perceptions of Bilingualism Shape Family Language Policies Among Spanish-  
Speaking Parents of Preschoolers**

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### **Abstract**

In the United States nearly one third of children under five live in homes where a non-English language is spoken. However, many of these language-minority (LM) children shift towards English monolingualism after beginning school in early childhood. While language input and usage are central to acquisition and maintenance in each language, less is known about parents' perceptions of bilingualism and how perceptions inform parents' actions to support their child's bilingual development in early childhood. By applying a family language policy framework to data from 14 in-depth qualitative interviews, this study explores the beliefs and practices of Spanish-speaking mothers of preschoolers in a small northeastern US city. Thematic analyses revealed that mothers viewed Spanish maintenance alongside English acquisition as essential for economic opportunity and family communication, yet differed in their perceptions of how bilingualism was best supported. Some implemented a Spanish-only-at-home policy, delegating their child's English development to the school setting. Others avoided setting rigid boundaries, instead employing various discourse strategies to motivate their child's active Spanish use at home and seeking out school-based supports. Social pressures on the child, incomplete knowledge of local bilingual programs, and the current political climate countered mothers' efforts to support their child's emergent bilingualism.

### **Keywords**

childhood bilingualism, early childhood education, family language policy, language-minority parents, parental ideologies, Spanish

## **Introduction**

The use of more than one language across home and school environments is an increasingly common experience for children in the United States. Close to one third of children under five years old hear a language other than English at home (Child Trends 2014; Pompa, Park, and Fix 2017). The maintenance of a minority language alongside the majority language can foster healthy identity development and closer family relationships (Collins et al. 2011; McCabe et al. 2013), and can afford access to greater economic opportunity (Callahan and Gándara 2014). Despite the many benefits of bilingualism, language-minority (LM) children in the US often lose productive skills in their non-English language during elementary school (Gibson et al. 2012; Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux 2011; Portes and Hao 1998), a process that may begin as early as preschool (Kan and Kohnert 2005; Wong Fillmore 1991).

This shift towards monolingualism in the majority language is not inevitable. Bilingual development is shaped by the quantity and quality of input as well as the child's output in each language (see Hoff, 2017 for a review) and the degree to which the minority language is supported in school (Collins et al. 2014; Winsler et al. 1999). However, less is known about how LM parents perceive the value of bilingualism for their child, and how these perceptions feature in their strategies to support the minority language at home and school. The developmental window that spans the preschool years (age three to five), may be particularly important. As LM children in English-medium preschools make rapid gains in English (e.g. Hammer, Lawrence, & Miccio, 2008), LM parents must consider whether and how to prevent minority language loss.

Bringing together insights from the sociolinguistics subfield of Language Policy (Spolsky 2004) and the psychology subfield of Language Acquisition, the emerging field of Family Language Policy (FLP; King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008) provides a useful framework through which to approach this topic. According to FLP, to understand the diverse language outcomes of

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children in multilingual environments we need to attend to parents' language beliefs, management efforts, and practices, as well as how these are shaped by larger sociopolitical forces. While some early studies focused on parents of higher socio-economic status who chose to add a language via a One-Parent-One-Language strategy (Döpke 1992; Saunders 1980), more recent work has explored the particular challenges faced by economically diverse immigrant families who speak a minority language at home and whose children learn the majority language primarily at school (see King and Fogle 2013 for a review)

This exploratory, qualitative study adds to this last effort by applying an FLP framework to the reported language beliefs, strategies, and practices of 14 lower-income Spanish-speaking mothers of preschool-aged children. By analyzing transcripts from semi-structured interviews, I investigate how respondents perceive the value of bilingualism for their child, conceive plans to support it at home and school, and enact these plans during their child's transition to formal schooling.

### **Literature Review**

Grounded in Fishman's early work on reversing language shift (1991) and Schieffelin and Ochs' language socialization framework (1986), Family Language Policy arose out of a need to describe the sociocultural as well as the psycholinguistic processes involved in child language acquisition. FLP is most frequently applied to cases of bilingual development, as the degree to which children hear and use each language depends on parents' explicit or implicit language choices. As posited by De Houwer (1999) and elaborated on in her Harmonious Bilingual Development framework (2015), parental beliefs, interactional strategies, and quantity of input all contribute to children's active use of each language and more balanced proficiency in each language. Thus, in order to understand why some LM children develop and maintain proficiency in two languages while others move from monolingual in a minority language to monolingual in

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the majority language, we need to closely examine parents' beliefs and how these influence language choices and strategies in the home. An additional goal of FLP is to consider the larger social and political forces that exert pressure on families and impact child language outcomes.

Spanish-speaking Latino parents represent 71% of LM parents in the US (Pompa, Park, and Fix 2017). Despite their numerical advantage compared to other language minority communities, Spanish nonetheless tends to be lost by the third generation after immigration (Veltman 1988), even in areas where Spanish-speakers enjoy more political and economic power (Eilers, Oller, and Cobo-Lewis 2002). Only a handful of studies attending to the core FLP components of language beliefs, strategies, and practices have been applied to Spanish-speaking Latino families in the US. These studies have mainly been conducted in areas with historically high concentrations of Spanish-speaking immigrants and have focused on parents of elementary and middle school-aged children.

In one such study, Pease-Alvarez (2003) interviewed Mexican-descent parents of third graders in Northern California. She found that parents saw bilingualism as beneficial for their children and associated losing Spanish with losing one's cultural identity. While most parents desired some Spanish literacy support from schools, they tended to see the local schools' bilingual classrooms as substandard. Spanish maintenance was seen as the parents' responsibility, though many reported that enforcing Spanish-only-at-home policies was challenging due to long working hours and a reluctance to set rigid rules for language use (see also Worthy and Rodríguez-Galindo 2006). In order to explore differences in beliefs and practices related to socioeconomic status, Lambert and Taylor (1996) surveyed Cuban-heritage mothers in Miami and reported that middle-class mothers tended to prioritize Spanish maintenance while working-class mothers tended to prioritize English acquisition. All had a 14- or 15-year-old child in Dade County Public Schools, and the two groups were defined based on

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whether or not children qualified for a free lunch program. In contrast, in their ethnographic study of Mexican-American families in Texas and California, Schechter and Bayley (2002) found that middle-class families (based on parental education, occupation and neighborhood) headed by second-generation parents in Texas often struggled to transmit Spanish to their children, while working-class immigrants in California tended to be more successful at maintaining Spanish use in the home. These seemingly divergent claims may reflect that parents who speak mostly Spanish at home are less concerned about Spanish maintenance and thus cite English acquisition as the greater priority, while those that use more English in the home are more concerned about reversing language shift. It is also important to note that in both studies, length of time in the U.S. and socioeconomic status were correlated, and thus it is unclear whether immigration history or social class were behind these findings.

An important theme across multiple studies was that parents' beliefs and practices shifted in response to changing life circumstances, that 'cause[d] respondents to reevaluate their goals and attitudes with regard to language use in the home' (Schechter, Sharken-Taboada, and Bayley 1996, 275–76). Examples of life events precipitating changes in language practices include changes in family composition such as divorce (Schechter, Sharken-Taboada, and Bayley 1996) and adoption (Puig 2010), and immersion in a new language environment in daycare or school (Prevo et al. 2011; Wong Fillmore 1991). While previous studies asked parents to recount such shifts retrospectively, none focused on parents whose children were in the midst of the first major change in language environments that most LM children experience: the transition from home to preschool at age three or four. This is typically LM children's first formal schooling experience, often with publicly-funded preschools where English predominates, and it represents a critical juncture for LM parents who want their child to continue using and learning a minority language alongside English.

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The importance of the time following school entry for LM children is highlighted in the few longitudinal studies that have tracked language usage and development during preschool and into elementary school. Hammer and colleagues (2008; 2009) found that while children made large gains in English over two years in an English-only government-funded preschool classroom, their mothers reported a decrease in their use of Spanish at home, accompanied by a deceleration in children's Spanish growth. In a study of Turkish LM children in Germany, Herkenrath (2012) documented how Turkish skills became increasingly receptive rather than productive after children began formal schooling, suggesting that reduced minority language input and practice may primarily affect expressive language abilities. Tagoilelagi-Leota and colleagues (2005) observed a similar phenomenon among LM Samoan and Tongan children in New Zealand. Other studies have found that when the minority language is supported in preschool, LM children continue to make strong gains in both languages (Winsler et al. 1999). In sum, the transition to schooling may have a disruptive effect on home language practices and language development, but school support for the minority language may mitigate this effect. However, few qualitative studies have investigated how parents articulate their language beliefs and plans regarding minority language maintenance at home and school during this period.

In order to fill this gap, the current study focuses on Spanish-speaking LM mothers of preschoolers. This particular sample contrasted with previous studies in that the mothers lived in a city without a historically established Latino community and had the choice to enroll their child in a recently established Spanish-English Dual Language program beginning in kindergarten. I ask the following research questions: 1) How do these mothers view the importance of bilingualism for their child and the role of home and school in supporting language development? 2) How do their language management strategies and practices align with beliefs

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about bilingualism and bilingual development? 3) What barriers prevent them from acting on their beliefs?

### **Method**

The setting for this study was a government-subsidized preschool in a small northeastern city with a relatively new Latino population (12% in 2013, representing a 54% increase since 2000). According to census data, one third of households spoke a non-English language, and 11% of the population spoke Spanish at home. A large percentage of the Latino population was from Guatemala (40%), and most of these were first-generation immigrants. The preschool was selected for its linguistic diversity: fifteen languages were represented at the time of the study, with 63% of all families speaking Spanish at home. While some classrooms had bilingual teachers or aides who used children's home languages as needed for understanding, the medium of instruction was English, making this preschool an appropriate site for an investigation into how LM parents experience their child's entry into an English-dominant instructional setting. Furthermore, the school district surrounding the center had recently opened a Spanish-English Dual Language program, with 20 seats each for Spanish- and English-dominant Kindergartners, allocated via a lottery. This marked the first time parents living in this district had access to a public elementary school designed to support bilingualism and biliteracy in Spanish and English. By asking parents' opinion of this new program, I was able to probe their interest in formal Spanish support for their child at school.

I used semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore parents' perceptions of bilingualism for two reasons. First, in my previous work on this topic I found that lower-income, Spanish-dominant mothers were difficult to reach through traditional questionnaires and were able to express their views more fully through face-to-face conversations. Second, as Cherciov (2013) concluded from her mixed-methods study of Romanian immigrants in Canada,

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‘qualitative, individual-level analysis appear[s] to be better suited for capturing and understanding the internal dynamics between *attitude* and migrant language development’ (731).

Data collection spanned August-October 2017. Given heightened anti-immigrant sentiment in the US, I was keenly aware of my positionality as a US-born white researcher. Though I learned Spanish from an early age at school (and to a lesser degree at home), traveled frequently to Guatemala during my time as a high school Spanish teacher, and worked with Latino children and families during my time as a literacy coach in bilingual classrooms, I have not personally experienced the challenges surrounding immigration or raising a child in a new language environment. Given my outsider status, I worked to establish rapport by attending parent meetings at the center and speaking one-on-one with parents about the study, which was neutrally described as a study of parents’ beliefs about language. I found that once parents understood that participation only required an informal conversation about a topic that was highly relevant to their lives, they were eager to share their experiences with me. While it is possible that I missed some nuances of meaning by not sharing the cultural and ethnic background of my participants, my outsider status may have also allowed parents to discuss their attitudes and practices more openly than they may have with a fellow parent facing similar language-related dilemmas (Schechter and Bayley 2002, xviii).

I interviewed 14 mothers of three- to five-year-old children. Nine of the interviews took place at the preschool and five took place in the participants’ homes, according to their preference. Twelve chose to be interviewed in Spanish and two chose to be interviewed in English. In order to elicit parents’ beliefs and experiences around their child’s bilingual development without implying that some views or behaviors were more ‘correct’ than others, the interviews were considerably open-ended. While a guide was used to ensure that the same topics were broached across participants (e.g. the parents’ language and school experiences, the child’s

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language practices at home and school, and the parents' plans for kindergarten), the conversation flowed naturally, and the order of topics varied. Interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Table 1. Social and Demographic Characteristics

Participant	Education	Current employment	First language	Current most comfortable language	Children: Gender, age
Juana	1 year short of a technical degree (abroad)	Janitorial & dry cleaning worker	Spanish	Spanish	<b>f, 4</b>
Yesenia	Technical degree in accounting (abroad)	Restaurant worker	Spanish	Spanish	<b>f, 4</b> ; m, 1
Rubila	Left school after 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade (abroad)	Restaurant worker	Spanish	Spanish	f, 8; <b>m, 5</b>
Sandi	Two years of university (abroad)	House cleaner	Spanish	Spanish	<b>m, 3</b>
Rocío	Technical degree in secretarial studies (abroad)	House cleaner	Spanish	Spanish	<b>f, 3</b> ; m, 1
Ruby	Completed 9 <sup>th</sup> grade (abroad)	House cleaner	Spanish	Spanish	m, 18; f, 13; <b>f, 3</b>
Azucena	Technical degree in accounting (abroad)	Homemaker	Spanish	Spanish	m, 9; <b>m, 4</b>
Eva	Currently working on BA (US)	Student	Spanish	English*	f, 7; <b>f, 3</b>
Dorothy	Has BA, considering graduate school (US)	After school program teacher	Spanish	English*	<b>m, 4</b> ; m, 0
Elizabeth	Currently working on BA (US)	Preschool teacher's aide	Spanish	Spanish & English*	<b>m, 5</b>
Alexandra	High school degree (US)	Preschool substitute teacher	Spanish	Spanish*	m, 9; m, 7; <b>m, 4</b>
Margarita	Technical degree in accounting (abroad)	Direct sales	Spanish	Spanish*	f, 5; <b>f, 3</b>
Marta	Two years of university (abroad)	Restaurant worker	Spanish	Spanish*	<b>f, 4</b>
Esmeralda	Technical degree in accounting (abroad)	Literacy specialist for a home visiting program	Spanish	Spanish*	m, 13; <b>m, 4</b> ; m, 2

Notes. All names are pseudonyms. \*Self-identifies as bilingual. Focal child in bold.

The sample was homogeneous in terms of the mothers' first language (Spanish) and socioeconomic status (all qualified for government-subsidized preschool), but heterogeneous in the mother's bilingual proficiency (see Table 1 for the background of each participant). All but two mothers were born in Latin America (the majority in Guatemala), and had immigrated to the US between the ages of 12 and 29. All 14 focal children were born in the US; half ( $n = 7$ ) were

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female and half ( $n = 7$ ) were the oldest/only child. Seven of the mothers considered themselves to be monolingual Spanish-speakers, and seven considered themselves to be bilingual in Spanish and English. Eight participants were raising children with a husband, and the remaining six were raising children either as a single parent or with support from adult family members. The range of educational attainment spanned from three years of grade school to a college degree.

Analysis was conducted in four stages: initial listening notes, collaborative open coding (Smagorinsky 2008), development and application of an etic coding scheme, and member-checks with individual participants. Listening notes were recorded immediately following each interview to reflect on the participant's individual story and thematic connections across interviews. Interviews were then transcribed in the language in which they were given (twelve in Spanish and two in English) and quotations were only translated into English if selected for inclusion in this manuscript. A Spanish-English bilingual research assistant and I thematically coded the same seven transcripts independently. After comparing and discussing our emic codes (such as *current political climate* and *trips to home country*), a codebook was developed that incorporated the themes we identified, including those we had anticipated based on the relevant literature and research questions (such as *family language policy*). Five transcripts were then double-coded using this codebook and the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Interrater reliability during this phase was adequate ( $Kappa = .78$ ), and so the remaining transcripts—including those used to develop the initial codes—were coded by either myself ( $n = 4$ ) or the research assistant ( $n = 5$ ). I then reviewed all 14 coded transcripts and added codes connecting home language practices described in the data to theory on discourse practices in bilingual families (De Houwer 2015; Lanza 1997). Finally, after an initial draft of this manuscript had been prepared, I met with 11 of the 14 participants (three were unavailable for follow-up) to ensure that my interpretations of their words accurately represented their views.

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### Results

I found that while mothers universally agreed that bilingualism in Spanish and English was essential for their child's future economic prospects and connections with family and cultural heritage, they differed in their beliefs about how languages were acquired and the role of home and school in supporting the minority language. Some mothers implemented Spanish-only-at-home policies in an effort to maintain a Spanish monolingual context in the home to counter-balance the English-monolingual context at school. Other mothers were reluctant to set rigid boundaries on language usage, and instead used various strategies to encourage their child to use Spanish in the home. The mothers without a Spanish-at-home rule were more likely to be concerned about Spanish loss and were more motivated to seek out formal Spanish supports for their child at school. However, factors such as the current political climate and peer influences often subverted mothers' efforts to sustain their child's emergent bilingualism.

### *Bilingualism for economic opportunity and family connections*

Consistent with previous research (Pease-Alvarez, 2003; Worthy & Rodríguez-Galindo, 2006), all 14 mothers strongly believed that speaking more than one language was important for their child. Yesenia, who came to the US at 24, said<sup>1</sup>, *'If they speak two or more languages, they will get a better job. ... My deepest hope is that she goes to college, so that she can be a professional. Knowing two or three languages.'* Alexandra, who immigrated at 16 and finished high school in the US, summarized it this way: *'Speaking another language ... opens up infinite opportunities.'*

When elaborating on *why* bilingualism was important for their child, all but two of the mothers ( $n = 12$ ) spoke about increased access to economic opportunities. Knowing only English was insufficient – it was learning English *in addition to* speaking Spanish that would give their child an advantage in the job market, both in the US and elsewhere. Ruby, who immigrated at

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age 25, said, *'It's very, very important, because it can open doors. Even though the language here (in the US) is English, ... you can work more in more places.'* This emphasis on the value of Spanish-English bilingualism differs from Lambert and Taylor's 1996 finding that working-class Cuban mothers prioritized English acquisition over Spanish maintenance. Instead, Ruby and others alluded to the new transnational economy, which would make speaking a second global language such as Spanish particularly valuable.

The same number of mothers ( $n = 12$ ) said bilingualism was important for communication with family members. Eva, who grew up speaking Spanish with her first-generation parents but now uses mostly English at home, realized that her three- and seven-year-old daughters were unable to communicate with their grandparents on a recent visit abroad. Esmeralda, who came to the US at age 22, told me that it was *'essential'* for her children to learn Spanish, *'because when we return to our country, it is very important that they know how to communicate.'* When speaking about the practical need to communicate in Spanish with family, many also brought up the importance of bilingualism to their child's cultural identity. Elizabeth, who came to the US at age 12 but had recently taken her five-year-old son to visit family abroad, put it this way: *'It is important as a parent, to show him your roots and where you come from, and your customs, and most of all, the language.'*

### ***Beliefs about language acquisition and the role of home and school***

While respondents offered similar explanations for why bilingualism was essential for their child, they differed in their views on *how* children acquire multiple languages and the corresponding responsibilities of the family and the school. Some mothers saw children as natural language learners who could acquire any language in which they were sufficiently immersed, while others believed simultaneous acquisition was contingent on individual aptitude. The first view is captured in Alexandra's statement: *'Children's brains are like sponges. They*

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*can learn three, four languages at the same time. It is easier for them to learn than us adults.'*

Mothers with this view observed that when languages were kept separate, their children quickly internalized which language was appropriate in each setting, as described by Esmeralda:

*My little one who is two goes to a daycare where nobody speaks Spanish. And I've heard him there during lunch. He asks for food in English. And here he asks in Spanish. ... He already understands that there they only speak English and here we only speak Spanish.*

They also tended to see consistency as important for preventing confusion, as Rocío, who came to the US at 29, explained: *'Here at home ... we only speak Spanish. I speak to her in my language. And school is for learning English. In this way, she does not get confused.'*

In contrast, Eva, one of the US-born mothers, believed that the ability to acquire two languages without confusion depended on the child. She worried that 'trying to do both languages at once' may have contributed to her older daughter's speech difficulties. Juana and Azucena, who immigrated at 27 and 29, respectively, both pointed to differences in Spanish proficiency among their children as evidence that individual differences may play a larger role than parental practices. Juana, who brought her five children to the US 18 years ago and was the primary caretaker of her four-year-old granddaughter, noted that only one of her adult children could speak and read Spanish and English fluently. Azucena, whose older son who had struggled to learn Spanish much more than her younger son, concluded that *'not all [children] have the same capacity to learn [two languages] at the same time.'*

Many mothers saw Spanish maintenance as their responsibility, and seemed to view cases of Spanish loss as reflecting poorly on the mother's choices and practices, rather than as a function of social pressures outside the family that incentivize English dominance (Wong Fillmore 1991). This belief, consistent with other studies of Spanish-speaking mothers in the US (Adair and Tobin 2008; Pease-Alvarez 2003) and Japanese mothers in the UK (Okita 2002), was revealed in stories the mothers told of family members and friends who had failed to enforce a

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consistent home language policy. Two respondents were deeply affected by a younger brother's loss of productive Spanish skills. Margarita had arrived in the US at 22 to find that her fifteen-year old younger brother, who had immigrated at age seven, *'spoke terrible Spanish.'* Alexandra had a similar experience and saw her mother as responsible for her brother's receptive bilingualism: *'At age five, six, she let him answer her completely in English. Now he can understand you in Spanish. But he cannot answer you in Spanish.'*

Esmeralda described how her US-born cousins did not insist on their children using Spanish productively. As a result, their children did not speak much Spanish, and *'they invent words.'* Yesenia told the story of a friend whose children's school convinced her to limit her Spanish use in the home, even though her English was not very good. *'And now that the children are grown—they are already fourteen, thirteen years old—they speak Spanish that is all mixed up.'* For at least these four parents, such cautionary tales impressed upon them the fragility of Spanish and the belief that it was their responsibility to preserve their child's bilingualism.

In addition to oral language development, all but one of the mothers said that it was very important that their child learn to read and write Spanish, and many saw themselves as responsible for their child's Spanish literacy. Rocío, a single parent who did not currently own any books in Spanish, nevertheless felt fortunate that she had the educational background to teach her children to read and write in Spanish. Others were less confident about their abilities in this domain and hoped that some support of Spanish literacy would be available through their child's elementary school. Rubila, who left school after third grade and came to the US at age 21, welcomed the possibility of Spanish support at school but was committed to going it alone if needed.

*If there are opportunities at school, of course I would accept [a teacher] that speaks Spanish. But if not, then I will help him in the afternoons, reading books to him in Spanish, because sometimes teachers only speak English. I will have to go to the library, get books, and read to him in Spanish so he does not forget it.*

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Juana, who struggled to support the Spanish development of her English-dominant granddaughter at home, wished that schools would teach both Spanish and English beginning in preschool.

Rubila, Juana, and several other mothers who saw language acquisition as dependent on individual child characteristics hoped that Spanish might be supported in school to some degree, but they had little awareness about the specific options available to them in their school district, as discussed below. Given the uncertainty around access to Spanish instruction in school, it makes sense that the majority of the mothers intended to take responsibility for their child's oral and written Spanish development.

### ***Management strategies and practices that aligned with beliefs***

In accordance with their beliefs about bilingualism and language acquisition, the mothers took different approaches to supporting language development. These ranged from rigid enforcement of home language policies to more flexible strategies encouraging Spanish learning. In a minority of cases, mothers reported advocating for more Spanish support from their child's school. When asked if they had rules about when and where each language was used, six mothers stated that they had a Spanish-only-at-home policy. Four of these were the same mothers who had witnessed the consequences of inconsistent Spanish use among family and friends. Yesenia had explained the rule to her four-year-old daughter this way: *'You're going to speak Spanish, mami. When you go to school, you will speak English because they will teach you English there. Here with me, you're going to speak Spanish.'* The remaining eight mothers said they did not have a formal rule, but nevertheless planned to strategically use Spanish with their child in order to support bilingual development. As Sandi, who immigrated in her early twenties, described it: *'[We decided] to always instill Spanish, as his strength is going to be English, outside the home.'*

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Of the six mothers who reported having an explicit Spanish-only-at-home rule, only Margarita and Esmeralda said that their children consistently respected this policy. Both had extended the rule beyond the home environment to include any verbal interaction between mother and child (in Margarita's case), or any time they addressed their child in Spanish (in Esmeralda's case). As Esmeralda explained, *'I tell them, "If I ask you something in English because you're with your friends, because they speak English, you answer me in English. If I speak to you in Spanish, you have to answer me (in Spanish)."'*

The remaining 12 mothers all reported that their child used English with them at least some of the time. The strategies that parents employed to encourage their child to use Spanish reflected Lanza's 'Parental discourse strategies towards child language mixing' (1997, 262). For example, four mothers told me that they and/or their Spanish monolingual husbands used what Lanza would call a *Minimal Grasp Strategy*. That is, they indicated they did not understand the child's English utterance in order to prompt a switch back to Spanish. As Rubila described, *'First, he says something to me in English. I say, "What did you say?" And he then says it to me in Spanish.'* Three parents reported using a *Repetition Strategy*, in which the parent repeats the child's English utterance in Spanish. As Sandi put it, *'When he says something in English or asks for something in English we always repeat it in Spanish.'* Lanza (1997) and De Houwer (2015) proposed that strategies such as *Minimal Grasp* and *Repetition* serve to establish a monolingual context and elicit the child's active use of the target language, namely Spanish in the home context.

Another common practice was explicitly teaching Spanish words by playfully asking the child to retrieve an object or name a color. For example, Azucena recounted how she taught her son the word for carrot by asking him to fetch a 'zanahoria' (*carrot*) from the refrigerator. In an approach that seemed to combine the *Repetition* strategy and explicit teaching, Juana sought to

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gradually build her English-dominant granddaughter's Spanish vocabulary. *'I try not to frustrate her too much. Instead, I look for a way to teach her. If she says "box," I say, "Okay, this is a caja" ... In this way, getting better little by little is what I aim for.'*

Three mothers without Spanish-only-at-home policies who engaged in explicit Spanish teaching at home—Rubila, Dorothy, and Elizabeth—took the initiative to ask Spanish-speaking teachers in English-medium classrooms to use more Spanish with their child. When Rubila discovered that her older daughter's second grade teacher spoke Spanish, she asked her to speak Spanish to her daughter. Dorothy, who spoke mostly English with her son but wanted him to learn Spanish, told his preschool teachers: 'Please speak to him in Spanish if you wish ... I want him to speak it more.' While it is unclear whether Rubila and Dorothy's requests influenced the amount of Spanish their children heard and used at school, Elizabeth described how a similar request marked a turning point in her son's language development.

*When he started at the school, he would say to me, "I don't want to speak Spanish." I said, "Why?" "Because my friends don't like it." I said, "Oh, boy." And I told him, "But m'ijo, it's important because speaking two languages is good. You can understand grandma, you can understand your dad, me, and you can help other kids." "Mom, my friends don't like it." And I said, "Papi, you have to be yourself. If they don't like it, you have to say, Okay, no problem, I like it." Then he started to understand, and I talked to the teacher. I told her, "Talk to Angel in Spanish."*

According to Elizabeth, after this conversation her son stopped resisting using Spanish.

Elizabeth's story illustrates how the transition to preschool can impact children's language preferences and practices, and also how strategies such as speaking frankly about the value of bilingualism or increasing Spanish input at school may help counter this shift.

### ***Barriers to bilingual development***

Despite unanimous belief in the importance of bilingualism, promoting balanced bilingualism in Spanish and English proved to be more difficult than anticipated for many mothers. As Family Language Policy would suggest, sociolinguistic and sociopolitical factors outside the mothers'

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control played a role in their language choices and practices. A common challenge was countering children's growing tendency to use English with peers, siblings, and even Spanish-dominant parents. In their study of Spanish-speaking students in Miami, Eilers and colleagues (2002) found a preference for using English with peers beginning in kindergarten, but several of the mothers I spoke to reported that this shift towards increased English usage began as early as age two or three, when their child had begun attending English-medium day care or preschool. Some mothers felt conflicted about policing English use among siblings. Alexandra, whose youngest son was four, shared:

*We always, from the first day of school, said "Spanish at home, English at school." But they speak English with each other, which I cannot change. Also, sometimes I also do not like to be so strict because, at the end of the day, it is their language.*

Rubila had also noticed a shift towards English, and worried about how this would affect communication with her five-year-old son:

*Children that are born here have to learn both languages. But I worry that they won't be able to, because my son speaks more English and very little Spanish. I worry, because I don't know what I will do if he speaks to me in English and I can't respond.*

Beyond a preference for using English, some mothers sensed that their children struggled to comprehend or form sentences in Spanish. These mothers faced a difficult decision as to how much they should 'push' Spanish versus focus on communication. Practices that emphasized the latter goal included accommodating the child's English utterances by indicating that they understood and continuing in Spanish (what Lanza calls a *Move On Strategy*), or simply responding in English (*Adult Code-Switches Strategy*). For example, Marta, who preferred to use Spanish with her daughter, nevertheless reported switching to English at times to ensure understanding:

*When she comes to me and wants to tell me something, she tells it to me all mixed up. In English, in Spanish. So then I, in order for her to understand, I try to speak a little English. Because if not, we will not understand each other.*

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According to Lanza (1997), use of these strategies contributes to a ‘bilingual context’ in which either language is permissible, and De Houwer (2015) posits that over time they can lead to the child becoming functionally monolingual in the socially dominant language.

For Eva and Dorothy, the two US-born mothers who grew up speaking Spanish at home, the challenge of establishing a ‘monolingual context’ in Spanish was amplified due to their own preference for English. Dorothy had successfully taught her son the colors in Spanish, but confessed:

I haven't made it my job. And I think I need to make it more my job. As in, be at home and only speak to him in Spanish, even if he doesn't understand. But I haven't committed myself to that.

Eva had similar ambitions but didn’t know where to begin: ‘I'm constantly thinking about it. It's like, how can I try to teach them Spanish? Do I make them flash cards with one over here and over there? Or like, do I just talk to them?’ Eva’s uncertainty may have stemmed from insecurities about the ‘correctness’ of her Spanish, which she mainly used when speaking to her mother.

Though many mothers encountered barriers to supporting their child’s Spanish at home, few were aware of local options for their child to receive formal Spanish support at school. When asked about plans for kindergarten, most said their child would attend whichever neighborhood school to which he or she was assigned. The majority had not heard of the district’s new Dual Language program for which their child was eligible beginning in kindergarten,<sup>2</sup> and only three parents had explored the option in depth. These were Elizabeth, who already secured a spot for her 5-year-old son; Dorothy, who was anxiously hoping to win a seat for her 4-year-old son the following year; and Alexandra, who had decided instead to enroll her 4-year-old in the same elementary school as his older brothers.

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Of the mothers who were less aware of the program, mothers who used more English with their children expressed more interest in applying. Marta, whose four-year-old daughter would be starting kindergarten the following year, said she would apply, because *'her English is good, but she needs to learn to write and read Spanish.'* Eva thought the program might be a way *'for [my daughter] to learn better Spanish, proper Spanish, rather than just however we speak.'* In contrast, those who spoke more Spanish at home seemed less enthusiastic. Yesenia, who had declared a Spanish-only-at-home policy just before her daughter started preschool, thought she might prefer to send her daughter to Central America to learn to read and write over a summer rather than apply for the dual language program. Margarita, who had successfully established a Spanish-only rule with her three- and five-year-old daughters, elected to support their Spanish literacy on her own while they attend the English-only neighborhood school.

Two mothers expressed concerns about the program. Esmeralda, who like Margarita maintained a Spanish-only household, had heard from her aunt that attending a bilingual school could make it harder for her children to go to college. Rubila worried that registering for the program might put her child's name on a government list: *'Many families got me scared. Because they talked about how that could affect him in the future with the government.'* Rubila's fears illustrate how the current political climate, in which immigrant communities are increasingly under attack, constrains the education options of families who cannot afford to take risks. Rubila also spoke frankly about the possibility of a forced return to her home country. Ironically, her immigration status both blocked her from seeking institutional support for her child's bilingual development and heightened the sense of urgency that her child acquire and retain skills in both languages. As a result, she steeled herself to take sole responsibility for her son's Spanish development.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The experiences of these Spanish-speaking mothers reveal that while they perceived bilingualism as important for work and family communication, they often struggled to sustain their children's Spanish development using various home language policies and discourse strategies. These findings were remarkably consistent with studies of Mexican-descent parents of older children living in Texas and California (Pease-Alvarez 2003; Schechter, Sharken-Taboada, and Bayley 1996; Worthy and Rodríguez-Galindo 2006), but add new insights into how parents think about their child's emergent bilingualism during early childhood.

Several mothers reported that their child was starting to prefer English, not only with siblings and peers, but also with Spanish-speaking adult caregivers. Elizabeth's story of her son Angel's declaration that he no longer wanted to use Spanish due to his friends' negative perception of Spanish seems to have ended happily. Elizabeth, herself an early childhood educator, advocated for more Spanish support from his preschool teacher and enrolled him in the Dual Language program so that he would learn to read and write in Spanish. Additionally, a visit abroad with his grandparents seemed to help Angel see the value in using two languages, as he was no longer shying away from using Spanish with his mother. It is important to note that this change in Angel's language usage may or may not be related to Elizabeth's efforts to reason with him about the long-term benefits of Spanish maintenance. While we know that most four-year-olds can reason from a premise (Leevers and Harris 1999), preschool-aged children often struggle with the idea that their preferences may change over time (e.g., Bélanger et al. 2014). Thus, it may be that Angel's experiences using Spanish to communicate in school and with his grandparents played a greater role in his language preferences than his mother's reasoning.

However, other mothers carried the full responsibility of their child's Spanish development. Rubila, a single mother who worked in the kitchen of a local restaurant and spoke

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very little English, said her son had barely begun speaking before he started preschool at two and a half. His English soon blossomed, and while he still used mostly Spanish with his mother, he used only English with other family members. Though she was wary of registering him for the Dual Language program, Rubila hoped he might receive at least some Spanish support at his neighborhood school. If this proved not to be the case, she was determined to provide it herself. Unlike Elizabeth, Rubila was not able to visit her home country. At the same time, she knew that the political situation in the US may force her to return permanently.

Six of the mothers responded to their child's transition to preschool by asserting a Spanish-only-at-home policy to counterbalance their child's English learning at school. While some were open to the idea of enrolling their child in a Dual Language program, these parents did not see it as essential, perhaps because they were confident that they could support their child's Spanish literacy at home or through other channels. For example, Yesenia was optimistic that her daughter would maintain her strong command of Spanish after starting preschool. The mothers who were most interested in the Dual Language program were those who were struggling to establish consistent Spanish usage at home and sensed that their child was already dominant in English. These included Dorothy, the second-generation mother who felt she needed to make it more her job to speak Spanish to her children; Juana, who was concerned about a growing language barrier between herself and her granddaughter; and Marta, whose daughter, like Rubila's son, had not started talking before she entered preschool at two and now seemed English dominant, despite hearing mostly Spanish at home.

This exploratory study contributes to our theoretical understanding in several ways. First, it builds on previous FLP studies of Spanish-speaking immigrant families in the US by showing that mothers in a small but growing Latino community in the Northeast held many analogous beliefs and concerns to Spanish-speaking parents in Texas and California. Second, it reveals that

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LM children's shift towards majority-language dominance and parents' concerns about minority language loss can begin as early as preschool entry. Third, it describes how parents respond to this change by establishing family language policies, employing strategies to promote and teach the minority language to their child, or, in some cases, seeking out school programs in the minority language. Mothers who had successfully established a Spanish-only environment in the home saw such a program as potentially helpful but not essential, while those whose children were already more English dominant showed greater interest. Finally, it surfaced external factors such as social pressures to acquire English and the current anti-immigration political climate that work against families' efforts to promote their child's bilingualism. Future studies should further explore how peers influence language usage in early childhood, how parents' language beliefs and behaviors shift over time, and how changing immigration policies interact with home language policies (see Gallo & Hornberger, 2017).

Several implications are of substantive interest to districts and schools that aim to support LM children's bilingual development through Dual Language programs. First, I found that the target demographic of the Dual Language program (Spanish-speaking parents of preschoolers) had very little awareness of the program, likely because they saw kindergarten registration as a matter of passive assignment in which parents have little power. Second, mothers who had successfully established a Spanish-only environment in the home saw such a program as potentially helpful but not essential. Finally, the parents who were most interested in the Dual Language program were those whose children were already becoming English dominant, even though in some cases they heard mostly Spanish at home. While this subset of LM children may stand to benefit greatly from external support for their home language, they may not match either of the two types of students the district expects to recruit (i.e. Spanish-dominant Latino children and English-dominant Anglo children). This potentially raises questions of equitable access to

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Dual Language programs (see Valdez, Freire, & Delavan, 2016). Flores (2016) and Cervantes-Soon, et al. (2017) have argued that Dual Language programs need to ask themselves whether they unintentionally privilege students from majority language backgrounds and further marginalize students whose language practices may diverge from standardized “ideals” in English or Spanish.

Though this study focused on parents’ perceptions, future research could build on these findings by looking more closely at young LM children’s perceptions as well as their agency in shaping family language policies, as suggested by Fogle and King (2013). While several mothers reported on the (perceived) language preferences of their child, the children were not directly consulted or systematically observed. Future studies might also explore in greater depth how preschool-aged LM children’s language attitudes influence their parents’ language choices. Furthermore, direct observations of the home language environment and children’s skills in each language could shed additional light on the links between perceptions, language choices and usage, and child language outcomes.

While this study focused on one community of Spanish-speaking mothers and their preschool-aged children, the challenges they face are shared by parents across the US and the globe. Wherever parents speak a minority language at home, they must grapple with the question of whether and how to support their child’s bilingualism during the transition to school in early childhood. When parents are also burdened by multiple low-paying jobs, uncertain legal status, and limited skills in the majority language, these questions become even more urgent. Studies applying a Family Language Policy framework have consistently found that parents in such settings see bilingualism in the languages of home and school as critical to their child’s well-being and future prospects. Strategies such as speaking only the minority language at home are difficult to maintain, and external support for the minority language at school may be called for

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to counteract a shift towards monolingualism in the majority language. Yet, as shown in this exploratory qualitative study, families who stand to benefit most from school-based supports often lack awareness of these programs, and instead attempt to carry the burden of their child's bilingual development solely within the family.

### **Notes**

1. Translations from Spanish to English are indicated in italics. See online supplemental materials for the original Spanish quotations.
2. One parent, Azucena, lived outside the boundary of the school district, and thus was the only mother who was not eligible to apply for the Dual Language program.

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### **Notes on contributor**

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**Online Supplemental Materials for ‘Spanish at Home, English at School’:  
How Perceptions of Bilingualism Shape Family Language Policies Among Spanish-  
Speaking Parents of Preschoolers**

List of quotations from participants in *original Spanish* and English translation:

*Si hablan dos idiomas o más, ellos van a tener un mejor trabajo. ... El anhelo mío es que vaya a la universidad, para que ella pueda ser una profesional. Sabiendo dos o tres idiomas.* [If they speak two or more languages, they will get a better job. ... My deepest hope is that she goes to college, so that she can be a professional. Knowing two or three languages.]

*Hablar otro idioma ... te abre una infinidad de oportunidades.* [Speaking another language ... opens up infinite opportunities.]’

*Es muy, muy importante, porque ya puede abrirse más puertas. A pesar de que el idioma aquí [en los EE.UU.] sea el inglés, ...se pueden trabajar más en más partes.* [It's very, very important, because it can open doors. Even though the language here (in the US) is English, ... you can work more in more places.]

*...porque cuando regresemos a nuestro país, es muy importante que sepan comunicarse.* [...because when we return to our country, it is very important that they know how to communicate.]

*Sí es importante como papá, enseñarle tus raíces y de dónde vienes, y tus costumbres, y más que todo, el lenguaje.* [It is important as a parent, to show him your roots and where you come from, and your customs, and most of all, the language.]

*Los niños son como esponjas, su cerebro. Entonces pueden aprender tres, cuatro idiomas al mismo tiempo. Tienen más facilidad de aprender que nosotros adultos.* [Children's brains are like sponges. They can learn three, four languages at the same time. It is easier for them to learn than us adults.]

*El pequeño de dos años, va a un daycare donde nadie habla español. Y lo he escuchado allá cuando está en lunch y pide en inglés. Y acá pide en español. ... Ya entiende que allá sólo hablan en inglés y aquí hablamos sólo español..* [My little one who is two goes to a daycare where nobody speaks Spanish. And I've heard him there during lunch. He asks for food in English. And here he asks in Spanish. ... He already understands that there they only speak English and here we only speak Spanish here.]

*Aquí en la casa ... la manera de hablar es sólo español. Le hablo el idioma mío. Y en escuela aprender el inglés. Entonces, no se confunde.* [Here in at home ... the approach is to only speak Spanish. I speak to her in my language. And school is for learning English. In this way, she does not get confused.]

*No todos [los niños] tienen la misma capacidad de aprender [idiomas] al mismo tiempo.* [Not all [children] have the same capacity to learn [two languages] at the same time].

*...Hablabla pésimo español* [...spoke terrible Spanish].

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*A los cinco, seis años, dejó que él le contestara todo en inglés. Y él puede entenderte en español. Pero no te puede contestar en español.* [At age five, six, she let him answer her completely in English. Now he can understand you in Spanish. But he cannot answer you in Spanish.]

...*Se inventan palabras* [...They invent words].

*Y ahora que los patojos ya están grandes, ya tienen catorce, trece años, por eso hablan todo cruzado el español.* [And now that the children are grown—they are already fourteen, thirteen years old—they speak Spanish that is all mixed up.]

*Si en la escuela hay posibilidades, claro que voy a aceptar que hable español. Pero si no ... entonces yo voy a ayudarlo por las tardes. Leerle libros en español, porque a veces las maestras sólo hablan inglés. Entonces que me toca a mí ir a la biblioteca, conseguir libros, leerle en español para que él no se lo olvide.* [If there are opportunities at school, of course I would accept [a teacher] that speaks Spanish. But if not, then I will help him in the afternoons, reading books to him in Spanish, because sometimes teachers only speak English. I will have to go to the library, get books, and read to him in Spanish so he does not forget it.]

*Tú vas a hablar español, mami. Allá cuando vas a la escuela, tú vas a hablar el inglés porque allá te van a enseñar inglés. Aquí conmigo, vas a hablar español.* [You're going to speak Spanish, mami. When you go to school, you will speak English because they will teach you English there. Here with me, you're going to speak Spanish.]

*‘[Decidimos] siempre inculcarle el español y ya su fuerte va a ser el inglés, ya afuera.* [(We decided) to always instill Spanish, as his strength is going to be English, outside the home.]’

*Digo yo, ‘Si yo te pregunto en inglés porque estás con tus amigos, porque hablan inglés, tú me contestas en inglés. Si yo te hablo en español, tú me tienes que contestarme [en español].’* [I tell them, ‘If I ask you something in English because you're with your friends, because they speak English, you answer me in English. If I speak to you in Spanish, you have to answer me (in Spanish).’]

*Él me habla primero en inglés. Yo le digo, ‘¿qué dices?’ Y él me dice en español.* [First, he says something to me in English. I say, ‘What did you say?’ And he then says it to me in Spanish.]

*Cuando él habla en inglés o pide algo en inglés nosotros siempre se lo repetimos en español.* [When he says something in English or asks for something in English we always repeat it in Spanish.]

*Trato de no frustrarla tanto. Busco mejor la manera de enseñarle... [si] ella dice ‘box,’ ‘Okay,’ yo digo, ‘esto es una caja.’ ... Así, poco a poco mejor es lo que trato de hacer.* [I try not to frustrate her too much. Instead, I look for a way to teach her. If she says ‘box,’ I say, ‘Okay, this is a caja ... In this way, getting better little by little is what I aim for.]

*Cuando empezó a la escuela, él me decía, ‘Yo no quiero hablar español.’ Le digo, ‘Por qué?’ ‘Porque a mis amigos no le gusta.’ Yo dije, ‘Oh, boy.’ Y le digo, ‘Pero m’ijo, es importante porque hablar dos idiomas es bueno, si tú entiendes a la abuelita, entiendes a tu papá, a mí, y*

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*puedes ayudar a otros niños.’ ‘Mamá, es que a mis amigos no les gusta.’ Y le digo, ‘Papi, pero tú tienes que ser tú mismo. Si a ellos no les gusta tú tienes que decir, Okay, no problem, I like it.’ Entonces empezó a captar, y hablé con la maestra, y le dije, ‘Háblale a Ángel en español.’* [When he started at the school, he would say to me, ‘I don’t want to speak Spanish.’ I said, ‘Why?’ ‘Because my friends don’t like it.’ I said, ‘Oh, boy.’ And I told him, ‘But *m’ijo*, it’s important because speaking two languages is good. You can understand grandma, you can understand your dad, me, and you can help other kids.’ ‘Mom, my friends don’t like it.’ And I said, ‘*Papi*, you have to be yourself. If they don’t like it, you have to say, Okay, no problem, I like it.’ Then he started to understand, and I talked to the teacher. I told her, ‘Talk to Angel in Spanish.’]

*Nosotros siempre, desde el primer día de escuela, es, ‘En la casa español, y en la escuela inglés’. Pero entre ellos se hablan en inglés, cual no puedo cambiar. También, a veces no me gusta ser tan estricta porque es, al final del día, es su idioma de ellos.* [We always, from the first day of school, said Spanish at home, English at school. But they speak English with each other, which I cannot change. Also, sometimes I also do not like to be so strict because, at the end of the day, it is their language.]

*Ellos que son nacidos aquí tienen que aprender los dos. Pero me preocupa de que no puedan, porque mi hijo habla más inglés, y español, poco. Y preocupo porque yo no sé, ¿cómo voy a ser si él me hable inglés y yo no le puedo contestar?* [Children that are born here have to learn both languages. But I worry that they won’t be able to, because my son speaks more English and very little Spanish. I worry, because I don’t know what I will do if he speaks to me in English and I can’t respond.]

*Cuando ella viene y me quiere comentar algo, ella me lo dice mixto. En inglés, en español. Entonces yo, para que ella también entienda, trato de hablar un poco de inglés. Porque si no, no nos vamos a entender.* [When she comes to me and wants to tell me something, she tells it to me all mixed up. In English, in Spanish. So then I, in order for her to understand, I try to speak a little English. Because if not, we will not understand each other.]

*...El inglés lo sabe bien, pero para español necesitaría para escribirlo, para leer.* [...Her English is good, but she needs to learn to write and read Spanish.]

*Muchas familias me metieron miedo. Porque hablaron de que eso puede afectarlo en el futuro con el gobierno.* [Many families got me scared. Because they talked about how that could affect him in the future with the government.]