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A Comparison of the Parent-Child Interactions Between Russian Immigrant and Non-immigrant Families in a Rural Setting in Missouri

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The purpose of this study was to compare the parent/child interactions between Russian immigrant and non-immigrant families in a rural Missouri school setting. A questionnaire was administered to 30 American families and 30 Russian immigrant families. Data concerning developmental level upon kindergarten entry were gathered from kindergarten screening protocols. Findings revealed that there were significance differences between the two sets of parents for the twelve literacy activities. Also significant differences were found regarding developmental levels between children who received Head Start as compared to those who attended preschool. Implications for early childhood literacy programs and the development of preschool language immersion programs within rural settings are significant. Also implications regarding understanding other ethnicities and cultures by rural educators are important.

In rural areas, immigration accounted for 31% population growth between 2000 and 2004 (Johnson, 2006). Smith-Davis (2004a) noted that language-minority students are the fastest-growing population in public schools. Between 1991 and 1999, the number of language minority children grew from eight to 15 million (Smith-Davis, 2004b). Almost one-fifth of the population in the United States lives in a household where a second language is spoken (Davis-Wiley, 2002). Immigrant families, who may remain in one area, form a new diverse student body bringing challenges for rural school personnel in meeting the needs of all students within their care (Ashbaker & Wilder, 2006). Additionally, rural schools face an increasing number of migrant workers, immigrants, and families in poverty (Beeson, 2001) thus as second language learners are thrust into the mainstream rural classrooms, effective communication becomes important. When immigrant students arrive in rural school communities, the language and literacy practices that they possess often vary drastically from those required by the school (Hawkins, 2004). Sturtevant (1998) noted that language minority learners are a “highly diverse population with diverse needs” (p. 73). Furthermore, a positive relationship has been found between the home literacy environment and children’s reading skills and knowledge at kindergarten entry (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002). Kim and Mahoney (2004) found that a child’s development is moderately correlated with their mother’s level of responsiveness. Additionally, Nord, Lennon and Westat

(1999) discovered differences in families’ participation in literacy activities based on race and ethnicity.

Although there have been numerous studies conducted regarding the importance of family literacy activities and their influence on the reading skills of children of kindergarten entry age, no significant body of research has investigated the parent-child interactions of Russian immigrant and American parents in a rural setting. This investigation was conducted due to the influx of Russian immigrants into this small rural school district in the heart of the Ozark Mountains. The administration of this school district located in south-central Missouri sought to examine the literacy needs of the Russian population within the district with the goal of providing appropriate preschool services to all families. At the present time, preschool children in the district are being served through the existing preschool and the Head Start programs; however, many Russian families are not fully using the resources available and the school district personnel wanted to know why. The research questions that guided this descriptive study were: Is there a difference in the parent-child interactions between children whose parents are Russian immigrants and children of American parents? If so, what are those differences? Is there a difference in the developmental level upon entering kindergarten of children receiving preschool services (i.e., Head Start, preschool) among Russian immigrant families compared to American families?

Conceptual Underpinning

In recent years, the majority of new immigrants to the United States have settled in rural areas, creating unique challenges for school district personnel (Ashbaker & Wilder, 2006). As the 21st century begins, the challenge for American schools thus lies in the moral and ethical responsibility to change past educational perceptions to ensure that accommodations are made and new immigrants' needs are met in all rural classrooms (Davis-Wiley, 2002). With this diverse population come diverse needs. These students are often classified as English Learners or "ELs" and require special assistance from their teachers and schools to meet rigorous academic content standards while also learning English (Gandara, Maxwell, & Driscoll, 2005). In fact these authors noted that "The challenge most often cited by rural K-6 teachers (27%) centered on their struggles to communicate with, connect to, and understand students' families and communities" (p. 29).

Ashbaker and Wilder (2006) noted, "Rural schools face challenges that are unique to rural areas in meeting the wide range of needs of all their students, including students with disabilities, students with low socioeconomic status (SES), immigrant students, and those who are English language learners and in recruiting and retaining highly qualified special education staff who can meet the challenges" (p. 14). Immigrant children often have experienced poverty, interrupted schooling, and have achieved varying degrees of English proficiency (Sturtevant, 1998). Smith-Davis (2004a) explained that parental involvement of immigrant parents in their children's school experiences might be hindered as a result of lack of language mediation. Grant and Wong (2003) argued that the literacy skills of English Language Learners (ELL) must be met in order for the growing language minority population to achieve educationally at a rate comparable to native English speakers. Hawkins (2004) noted that the second language is a system of "words and forms" and that language learners must create a way to organize and use the new language. Additionally, immigrant children learn quickly that it is unacceptable to be different and therefore, make every effort to avoid speaking their native language. The lack of cultural assimilation or experiences often hinders English language learners as they struggle to learn how and when to use new words (Chamness & Endo, 2004).

Research also confirms the importance of home environments and preschool literacy experiences (Holloway, 2004). Nord, Lennon and Westat (1999) reported, "Children begin the process of learning to read long before they enter formal schooling" (p.1). Molfese, Modglin, and Molfese (2003) conducted an examination of the role of environment in the development of reading skills of preschool children and confirmed earlier findings that both home and SES influence intelligence scores of children. Young (2003) also has suggested that family literacy services that focus on helping immigrant families' results in improving their

education, supporting their child's learning, and ultimately develops a connection with the American school system. Along with Carter (2004) who found that through collaboration, immigrant parents began to understand the importance of conforming to the school's expectations, while teachers began to recognize the strengths within the culturally diverse families.

Jensen (2006) argued that:

The impact of immigration can, and often is, more acutely felt in rural communities than big cities, even if the absolute numbers of new comers may be much smaller. The social and economic infrastructures of rural places are often ill-prepared to handle even comparatively modest increases, and significant inflows can quickly overwhelm. In small places, even numerically modest increases can represent a large increase in population growth" (p. 7)

Additionally, school personnel often misunderstand cultural differences in attitudes regarding childcare and childrearing and immigrant parents may be hesitant to accept intervention (Smith-Davis, 2004a). Rural educators frequently struggle with immigrant students who are second language learners. Often the values of traditional schooling conflict with rural cultural values resulting in classrooms of unmotivated, disengaged, and sometimes disruptive students (Davis-Wiley, 2002). Davis-Wiley added that typical rural classroom teachers in the United States are white and monolingual with English being their first and only language and are not prepared to teach children who are bilingual. Also, teachers in rural schools are less likely to meet the mandate for "highly qualified teacher" (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Eady and Zepeda (2007) reported that many rural school districts are not in close proximity to universities where teachers could receive the "expert" consultation and appropriate professional development (p. 6). Conversely, the research did identify benefits to leaders and teachers in small, rural communities. Among the positive aspects cited were the opportunities to develop close relationships among the staff, students and community (Beaulieu & Israel, 2005). Such interactions contribute to development of social capital with all stakeholders.

Therefore, the focus of this study was to examine the parent-child interactions of parents of Russian immigrant and non-immigrant parents and their children in a rural setting. The findings from this study were specifically utilized to provide insight to the administration of a rural school district in meeting the literacy needs of a Russian population within the district and ultimately help the district plan for meeting the challenges of more diverse populations in the future.

Methodology

Participants

A purposefully selected group of 30 Russian immigrant parents and a randomly selected group of 30 non-immigrant parents from one rural Midwest school district were used in this study. The district is located in a rural setting in Missouri with a student enrollment of 1,421. Over fifty-nine percent of the district's students are eligible for free or reduced lunch prices. Graduation rate for this district during the 2005 school year was 64.5 percent, while the student teacher ratio is one to eighteen (Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (DESE), 2007). The district student population is 97.8% white, with a Russian minority population (4%) increasing in just the last five years. The most common places of birth for these Russian born

residents are Murmansk (12%) and Arkhangel'sk (12%) along the Barents Sea. The Russian population presents unique challenges for the school district. As English is not their first language, communication issues are often identified as a primary concern when dealing with this population. Bi-lingual school personnel are not common, leading to reliance on translators and translations services outside of the county. Communication barriers combined with the culture's desire for privacy contribute also to this population's avoidance of early childhood education. Additionally 90 kindergarten screening protocols from the 2004-05 school year were collected. Return rate of the parent-child interaction questionnaire from the Russian speaking parents and the English speaking parents was an overall return rate of 66% of the questionnaires completed and returned (see Table 1).

Table 1

Return rate of parental questionnaires

	<u>Number of Questionnaires Distributed</u>	<u>Number of Questionnaires Returned</u>	<u>Return Rate</u>
Russian Immigrant Parents	30	17	57%
Non-Immigrant Parents	30	23	77%

Note: N = 40 parents, 17 Russian immigrant and 23 American

Data Collection

A quantitative descriptive design was selected in order for these researchers to achieve as great an understanding of the parental child interactions with the minimal intrusion. The Likert-type questionnaire for this study was formulated based on literacy and parent-child interaction information gathered through the literature review and was translated into the Russian language to accommodate immigrant participants (Russian parents) of the study (7= highly frequent to 1= never). The questionnaire was administered to all of the parents of preschool age students in the district. To achieve content validity, the literature review provided information describing the various literacy components that comprise an effective program and were included in the instrument. Nord, Lennon, and Westat (1999) noted that reading and storytelling stimulate a child's imagination, increase their vocabulary, and provide information about the world around them. Children who are read to become better readers and perform better in school (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Mikulecky (1996) discussed the merits of conversation in addition to reading to children and the role conversation and explanatory talk plays in predicting a child's later reading achievement. The survey consisted of

25 items and had an alpha coefficient of .69, through test-retest. The lowest and highest subscale correlation was .41 and .79, respectively. The validity of the instrument was strengthened based on a comparison of a similar instrument utilized by the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy. Data were also gathered from the 90 kindergarten screening protocols to determine developmental level upon kindergarten entry and identification of preschool experiences, if any.

Data analysis

In an effort to determine if a significant difference exists in parent-child interactions of Russian immigrant families compared to non-immigrant families, a mean and mean difference were found for each subgroup and then compared to each other through a *t-test* analysis to determine whether means are significantly different at a selected probability level (Gay, 1996). A critical value of $p < .05$ was used to determine statistical significance. The kindergarten screening protocols were reviewed for students enrolled in kindergarten during the 2004-05 school year. Data were gathered regarding developmental level upon kindergarten entrance and participation in early childhood programs.

Limitations

Due to a limited sample, some error may exist within this study. In addition, the limited availability of kindergarten screening data and the small number of Parent-Child Interaction Questionnaires returned narrowed the statistical analysis. While the authors provided various interpretations of the data, additional explanations may exist due to limitations listed. Thus the findings of this study are framed within these limitations.

Findings

Demographics

In an effort to better understand the population included in this study, demographic information is provided. Results of the questionnaires returned indicated that 44.8% of the fathers had a 12th grade education compared to 32.5% of the mothers. None of the Russian immigrant fathers who responded indicated any education beyond 12th grade, while the Russian immigrant mothers indicated a slightly higher level of education. The majority of the families (82.2%) had three children, and the number of children per family was closely associated to the size of non-immigrant families. The median household income for the families was \$19,894 with less than 15% of the parents having earned a college degree.

Differences in parent-child interactions

This study sought to determine if there were differences in the parent-child interactions between children whose parents are Russian immigrants and children of American parents and if so, what are those differences? Thus the means of the participants regarding literacy activities in the home were analyzed using a comparison of means. For the twelve literacy activities that were assessed, the mean for non-immigrant English speaking participants ranged from 1.16 (days during the past month visited the library) to 6.33 (days per week the child looked at or played with books). The English speaking parents noted that they helped their children make connections with books to life experiences ($M= 4.77$) and pointed out words in the environment more frequently ($M=4.86$). Furthermore, this set of parents reported more math activities ($M=5.05$) and use of nursery rhymes ($M=5.33$).

The mean for the Russian immigrant participants ranged from 2.00 (days during the last week words in the child's environment were pointed out), to 5.86 (days during the past week books were read with the child) (see Table 2). Additionally these parents reported that they visited the library more ($M=3.00$) and read to their children ($M=5.86$) just as often as the English speaking parents ($M=5.74$). These parents also allowed their child to turn the pages of the book and to learn new words in a book at the same rate as the English speaking parents.

Table 2

Means and standard deviation of parent-child interactions in the home

	<u>English</u>			<u>Russian</u>		
	Mean	N	SD	Mean	N	SD
Number of days read books/week	5.74	23	1.484	5.86	17	1.676
Allowed child to help turn pages	5.61	23	1.270	5.71	17	1.604
Asked child questions about book	5.61	23	1.500	5.14	17	1.345
Helped child learn new words in book	4.96	23	1.522	5.00	17	2.160
Helped child make connections w/ book & experiences	4.77	22	1.631	3.50	16	2.258
Days/week child played/looked at books	6.33	21	0.966	5.67	16	1.633
Days/month visited library	1.16	19	1.344	3.00	16	2.000
Days/week writing activities	2.62	21	1.687	2.17	16	1.722
Days/week words in environment	4.86	21	1.797	2.00	16	1.897
Days/week songs/rhymes	5.33	21	2.153	3.00	15	1.225
Days/week math activities	5.05	21	1.910	2.83	16	1.602
Days/week discuss t.v./videos	4.10	21	2.343	2.17	16	2.858

Thus the data set revealed that there are cultural differences that resulted in dissimilar ways in which parents provided literacy activities to their children. The American parents helped their children make connections between books and experiences. They also discussed words in the child's environment, sung songs and nursery rhymes and connected reading with math activities more than the immigrant parents. However, the Russian immigrant families indicated visits to libraries and other facilities where books are available almost three times more often than their English-speaking counterparts. They also helped their child with new words and read as often to their children as the non-Russian parents. One caveat to note is that while it was not significant, Russian families are

reading more books to their children, while American parents see the use of the TV or videos as a means to enhance literacy for their children. Finally, it should be noted that neither group of parents were providing sufficient writing activities at home for their preschool age children.

An Independent Samples *t*-test (See Table 3) substantiated a statistical significance difference was present for the days per month the Russian immigrant families visited the library as compared to the non-Russian families ($p=.007$). Other significant differences between the two sets of parents were that the English speaking parents pointed out or used the words from school in the environment more ($p=.003$) and also used songs or nursery rhymes more frequently ($p=.038$).

Table 3

Means and standard deviation of parent-child interactions in the home

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Number of days read books/week	EVA	0.038	0.848	-0.263	27	0.794	-0.18
	EVNA			-0.247	9.241	0.810	-0.18
Allowed child to help turn pages	EVA	0.875	0.358	0.023	27	0.981	0.01
	EVNA			0.020	8.108	0.985	0.01
Asked child questions about book	EVA	0.434	0.516	0.763	27	0.452	0.49
	EVNA			0.817	11.396	0.431	0.49
Helped child learn new words in book	EVA	1.116	0.300	-0.061	27	0.952	-0.05
	EVNA			-0.052	8.086	0.960	-0.05
Helped child make connections w/ book & experiences	EVA	1.419	0.245	1.468	25	0.154	1.21
	EVNA			1.227	6.598	0.262	1.21
Days/week child played/looked at books	EVA	3.991	0.057	1.187	24	0.247	0.63
	EVNA			0.903	6.117	0.401	0.63
Days/month visited library	EVA	4.568	0.044*	-3.000	22	0.007*	-2.00
	EVNA			-2.317	6.220	0.058	-2.00
Days/week writing activities	EVA	0.059	0.811	0.432	24	0.669	0.33
	EVNA			0.420	7.929	0.685	0.33
Days/week words in environment	EVA	0.068	0.797	3.301	24	0.003*	2.85
	EVNA			3.248	8.062	0.012*	2.85
Days/week songs/rhymes	EVA	6.315	0.019*	2.205	23	0.038*	2.25
	EVNA			3.073	11.303	0.010	2.25
Days/week math activities	EVA	0.871	0.360	2.463	24	0.021	2.12
	EVNA			2.712	9.683	0.022	2.12
Days/week discuss t.v./videos	EVA	0.329	0.572	1.849	24	0.077	2.08
	EVNA			1.635	7.046	0.146	2.08

Differences in the developmental level

This investigation further sought to determine if there were differences in the developmental level upon entering kindergarten of children receiving preschool services (i.e., PAT, Head Start, preschool) among Russian immigrant

families compared to American families. The data set revealed only three Russian immigrant children participated in early education services through Head Start while 52 American born children were exposed to early education from either a preschool or Head Start setting (see Table 4).

Table 4

Language of the child and early education

<u>Language of the child</u>		<u>Early Education</u>			<u>Total</u>
		none	Preschool	Head Start	
English	N	31	27	25	83
	Lang %	37.3%	32.5%	30.1%	100.0%
Russian	N	14	0	3	17
	Lang %	82.3%	0%	17.6%	100.0%
Total	N	45	27	28	100
	Lang %	45%	27%	28%	100.0%

Note: Lang % = Percent within Language of Child

When the means of the participants regarding developmental level upon kindergarten entry were compared using a one-way ANOVA, significant differences in developmental readiness level were found in the children receiving early education. When Post Hoc comparison (see Table 5) was applied to early education and percentile rank, it revealed a statistically significant difference between the

group receiving no early education and the group receiving preschool education ($p = .001$), and the group receiving preschool education and Head Start ($p = .041$). However, there was not a significant difference between the group receiving no early education and Head Start ($p = .468$). Preschool education provided by the district appears to have the greatest impact on children's education success over Head Start or no formal early childhood experiences.

Table 5

Post Hoc Multiple Comparisons of early education and percentile rank

<u>(I) Early Education</u>	<u>(J) Early Education</u>	<u>(I-J) Mean Difference</u>	<u>Std. Error</u>	<u>Sig.</u>	<u>95% Confidence Interval</u>	
					<u>Lower Bound</u>	<u>Upper Bound</u>
none	Preschool	-22.42	5.916	.001*	-36.55	-8.29
	Head Start	-7.13	6.040	.468	-21.56	7.29
Preschool	none	22.42	5.916	.001*	8.29	36.55
	Head Start	15.29	6.190	.041	0.50	30.08
Head Start	none	7.13	6.040	.468	-7.29	21.56
	Preschool	-15.29	6.190	.041	-30.08	-0.50

*Note: *The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.*

Next, a table of means was constructed to compare differences in developmental level mean scores of students

receiving preschool education, Head Start, and no early education (Table 6). For the three early education opportunities, the mean range was 63.89 for preschool,

48.60 for Head Start, and 41.47 for students receiving no early education services prior to enrolling in kindergarten. Early childhood education apparently is making a difference

with these children’s academic performance, thus all families should be made aware of these benefits, especially immigrant families.

Table 6

Developmental level percentile rank table of means

Early Education	Developmental Level		
	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
none	41.47	45	23.416
Preschool	63.89	27	20.670
Head Start	48.60	28	22.626
Total	51.02	100	23.999

Discussion

From this investigation it is apparent that rural school personnel areas are being presented with a myriad of unique challenges. As Purcell, East and Rude (2005) argued, since rural school districts represent between 10 to 25% of all districts, they thus represent a significant number of students, including immigrants. Further complicating these challenges is the notion that the educational infrastructures of rural school districts are not prepared to handle even comparatively small influxes of English limited speaking students (Jenson, 2006). The comparison of parental-school interactions between the Russian immigrant families and the American parents in the areas of literacy home activities revealed the role of the library appeared to be very significant for immigrant families. Perhaps solutions to facing such challenges for rural school personnel include securing grants to help fund more mobile library programs, and forming business-school partnerships between the school and the community libraries. These increased partnerships and the use of a mobile library can further support the value that these parents placed on libraries and perhaps remove any obstacles to their access. The analysis of the literacy activities revealed that when the American parents interacted with their children they helped the children make connections with books read to experiences they have had, discussed words in the child’s environment, and recited nursery rhymes. Thus, this data set aligned with earlier research (Holloway, 2004) that found that children of ethnically diverse families were less likely to be read to or told a story than white children. Furthermore, the findings, while revealing that immigrant families were valuing literacy by taking their children to the library on a frequent basis, perhaps the parents’ lack of English language skills

hinders their interactions with their children regarding vocabulary activities. As Keis (2006) reported, when immigrant families are allowed to interact with literacy materials, they validate their own culture and begin to see themselves differently and ultimately will recognize that they have a right to have a “voice” in this new world (p.14).

This data set also extends previous research suggesting that preschool education and experiences are essential for kindergarten readiness regardless of ethnic identity (Carter, 2004; Kim & Mahoney, 2004). Unfortunately, children of immigrant families are not attending preschool or Head Start at the same rate as American families, especially in rural areas. More consideration must be given regarding the implications for language-minority students (Grant & Wong, 2003) not attending structured early childhood programs. Perhaps additional literacy efforts must focus on assisting English language learners and parents in acquiring the language and assimilating into the new culture.

Furthermore, this data set revealed that culture does play a role in how parents deal with learning. Thus, rural teachers and administrators should be specially trained at the pre-service level and beyond in order to understand the combined role that language and culture play in student performance (Obiakor & Wilder, 2003). When district personnel receive training and become knowledgeable about and willing to address the needs of ESL students, the various challenges that diversity brings to rural school settings can be minimized.

Implications for Practice

Keis (2006) postulated that as the world grows smaller it will become notably important to nourish the home cultures of the culturally diverse families that are an essential part of

the American rural experience (p. 19). As the rural school population continues to grow more diverse, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest the need for literacy-rich home environments and participation in quality early education programs (Aulls & Sollars, 2003; Molfese et al., 2003; Tucker, 1998). It appears parent involvement is a major key to the academic success of all children regardless of ethnicity. Hence, there is a need for family literacy programs that not only teach immigrants the English language but also encourage them to acquire skills that will allow them to feel confident in assisting their children's literacy development and comfortable developing relationships with the school, which would ultimately improve the language and literacy skills of both parents and children and student achievement. Additionally, the possibility of a preschool language immersion program within the Russian community may build trust among the immigrant families, therefore allowing early education opportunities for immigrant children. Strengthening the literacy interactions among parents and their children followed by involvement in quality early education programs will allow children to begin their kindergarten experience prepared. However, an effective way to gather much needed data and improve parental involvement from the Russian immigrant families must be explored. These efforts will provide insight into programs and services that will ultimately equip all children with kindergarten readiness skills needed to successfully begin their education and provide all parents the opportunity to become literate, educated, and their child's best first teacher.

Furthermore, regarding the preparation of rural early childhood teachers to meet the needs of this ever-changing student population, pre-service teachers would do well to work within various school cultures seeking exposure to diverse populations. Universities should continue efforts within school districts to sustain educational experiences with pre-service teachers as well as veteran teachers. Universities should also continue efforts to address the effectiveness of courses offered in preparing teachers for the diverse populations they will teach. While addressing the needs of teachers on University campuses the need also exists for Universities to reach out and provide resources needed to these isolated rural communities. Perhaps by providing distance learning courses and on-going, on-site professional development with a focus on diverse cultural needs of rural students and parents, these challenges facing rural schools can be met and successfully managed resulting in "no child being left behind". While the occurrence of diversity is changing slower in rural settings, the impact of that change is more significant due to capacity. Therefore, the time has come for rural educators to seize these challenges and make them into opportunities for all children. Within the small learning communities that make up our rural schools inclusiveness for all students, especially English learners, can happen and can be made to be successful.

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