

Raising Young Children in Multilingual Montreal: Immigrant Chinese Parents' Language Choices and Storybook Reading Style

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Abstract

This observational study aims to deepen our understanding of how Chinese (Mandarin-speaking) immigrant parents living in Montreal, Quebec interact with children ages 3 to 6 years during storybook reading. Parents were observed sharing a storybook with their child with a Mandarin book and a French or an English book, depending on parental choice. Parents also responded to questionnaires on language use at home, views on bi-/multilingualism, and family reading. While data collection and analysis is still in progress, findings for 20 families will be available by June 2024, and preliminary findings based on 10 families are now available.

Of the 10 families, seven are of middle SES and use primarily Mandarin at home, have more Chinese books at home than English or French books, and engage in Chinese book reading more frequently. Analysis of parent-child reading for language use and content (i.e., parental text-reading; interactive strategies by parents; children's initiations and responses) suggests that parents were more comfortable interacting in Mandarin. Firstly, with Mandarin books, most parents not only read the text but also engaged in content-related discussions. The quality of interaction was higher relative to either English or French, and characterized by parental expressiveness, physical contact with the child, and high levels of child involvement. Secondly, when reading English or French books, half of the parents read the text in the book language but conversed about the book with their child in Mandarin. The remaining parents either retold the stories and conversed in Mandarin or read and engaged with the child in the book language. The data thus far indicate diversity in how parents interact with their children. Parents' practices appear to be consistent with their views on bi-/multilingualism expressed in their questionnaires; analysis of the relationships between parental views and practices is underway and will be presented.

The findings will inform a second study intended to support the parents in raising their child in a bi-/multilingual environment. The two studies will guide educators, policymakers, and practitioners in designing programs that align with the practices and preferences of Chinese immigrant families in Quebec.