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Hispanic Parents' Involvement and Teachers' Empowerment as Pathways to Hispanic English Learners' Academic Performance

Hector Rivera[1] and Jui-Teng Li[1]

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Hispanic English learners' learning, their parents' involvement, and their teachers' empowerment through professional knowledge. It is believed that Hispanic parents' involvement in their children's school activities is more influential to academic performance and educational attitudes than is teacher empowerment alone. A total of 339 Hispanic English learners, 339 parents, and 40 teachers participated in this study. Structural equation modelling was used. The analysis produced an empirical model with a nonsignificant value of χ^2 (53.11). Due to the nonsignificant difference of the *p* value, the empirical model was found to be a good fit. These results revealed that Hispanic parents' involvement has a positive impact on their children's academic performance, and that teachers' empowerment has a negative impact when primarily focused on professional knowledge attainment only.

Keywords

parental involvement, English learners, teacher empowerment, academic performance

[1]Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jui-Teng Li, Department of Educational Psychology, College of Education and Human Development, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843, USA.
Email: juitengli@tamu.edu

Introduction

Socioeconomic status (SES) determines children's educational pathways (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). For children with low SES, they confront more educational challenges than any other children (Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2014). For example, they have less access to resources for developing and enhancing their academic capacities and skills. SES of a family is also found to have a strong association with children's academic performance (Häkkinen, Kirjavainen, & Uusitalo, 2003; Lareau, 2002; Orr, 2003) and educational attainment (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). These findings indicate that there is a relationship between family SES and educational stratification. To buffer the detrimental effect of educational stratification associated with family SES on children's academic performance, parent involvement associated with family educational cultures (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009) and teacher's professional knowledge (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006; Gimbert, Bol, & Wallace, 2007) were considered as better mediator variables.

However, there have been very few large-scale studies (e.g., Dubow et al., 2009; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Neri, Lozano, Chang, & Herman, 2016) focusing on the impact of SES on academic performance of young Hispanic English learners (ELs); few of these studies controlled for the SES of these Hispanic ELs' parents. The studies also did not discuss the relationship between the parents' perceptions towards their role at school, which is influenced by their childrens' teacher and by the school, and their actual self-imposed engagement in their children's education. Furthermore, these studies did not discuss the impact of that parental engagement on Hispanic ELs' academic performance. Also, there is little statistical evidence available to show that teachers' professional knowledge plays an indirect factor on students' education, or that teacher empowerment plays a direct factor on students' education. Therefore, to fill these gaps, we determined to conduct a study to examine the effect and pathway of parent involvement and teacher empowerment (as it related to their professional development) on Hispanic ELs' learning.

Conceptual Framework

This study reviewed the relationship between Hispanic family educational cultures, teacher empowerment, and Hispanic ELs' academic performance. The conceptual framework of the relationship was derived from two large-scale studies: Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) and Marks and Louis (1997). In the Leithwood and Jantzi's (1998) study, they considered family educational cultures to be assumptions, norms, and beliefs toward school education that a

family possesses. Their results showed family educational culture has a more positive relationship with students' engagement than does teacher leadership alone. This compelling evidence revealed that schools can help a family enhance their educational culture in many ways (e.g., parenting capacity building and parental involvement in school activities), which may positively influence students' level of academic performance and engagement. In the study by Marks and Louis (1997), they discussed the pathways between teacher empowerment and students' academic performance. Their compelling argument was that teacher empowerment, as it related to professional knowledge, does not have a direct relationship with student academic performance, but other factors do (e.g., teacher's pedagogical practice).

Literature Review

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), within 6 years, the number of ELs in K-12 public schools in the United States increased from 4,638,344 (2009-2010) to 4,803,579 (2014-2015). During the school year 2014-2015, among the 4,803,579 ELs enrolled in the program, Hispanic (78%) represented a majority of the student population. According to Maxwell (2012), by 2020, in K-12 public schools in the United States, one of every four students will be Hispanic. Therefore, more attention should be given to Hispanic ELs. Disadvantaged Hispanic ELs in the United States have a unique cultural experience towards education (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995) and face particular challenges such as academic failure and few resources for enhancing their literacy skills (Olson, Matuchniak, Chung, Stumpf, & Farkas, 2017).

According to Lee and Bowen (2006), parents from different ethnic backgrounds possess different educational values and ways of educating their children. This implies that different educational culture embedded in family dictates how parents perceive their roles in children's academic learning. Hispanic parents see teachers as authorities on their children's education (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995). Hispanic parents also assume that teachers must actively and directly communicate with them if their children are careless about academic learning or are having deviant behaviors (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995). For Hispanic parents, it is the school's responsibility to help their children obtain academic knowledge and minimize negative learning attitudes and behaviors (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000; Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008). Moreover, Hispanic immigrant parents often perceive themselves as outsiders to the school system (Klugman, Lee, & Nelson, 2012). This indicates that Hispanic parents tend to take a passive role in communication with teachers about their children's school learning performance. Such

one-way communication hinders a meaningful communication between parents and teachers as well as the successful educational development of children.

Relationships Between Parent Behaviors and Their Children's Learning

According to Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), the level of parental involvement in children's education is highly associated with parents' perceptions of parenting roles and engagement in school activities. Moreover, from the children's perspectives, their parents' involvement is more influential to their academic performance (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). According to Jeynes (2005), a positive, medium effect size (.51) on academic performance was found from educational interaction between parents and children. He also found that when parents participate in children's academic activities with encouragement from teachers, this engagement demonstrates an equivalent of 4 to 5 months' improvement in reading or math performance. This is indicative of the need for parents to actively participate in educational activities with their children in order to positively influence their children's academic performance and educational attitudes.

According to Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996), the role of teachers is a primary factor in students' learning attitudes and performance, which may predict their future education pathway. It is necessary to have teachers invite parents to school to get involved in the children's education. According to Anderson and Minke (2007), schools' and teachers' invitations for parents to participate in children's learning determine parents' decisions to get involved in children's learning at home and school. Moreover, according to Reed, Jones, Walker, and Hoover-Dempsey (2000), the perceptions of teacher invitations, the construction of the parent's role, and self-efficacy in supporting children's educational achievement explained 35% of the variance in parent-involvement behaviors. It is believed that certain parent behaviors supported by teachers and schools will encourage more achievement by Hispanic students, such as (a) has high academic expectations, (b) sets high expectations in the completion of school, (c) connects education with success, (d) expresses desire and acts to further their education, and (e) acts as a role model for acquiring an education (Lara-Alecio, Irby, & Ebener, 1997). Engaging families in education breeds positive feelings towards the classroom and the home environment, and thus is supportive of the children's academic success (Parker, Lara-Alecio, Ochoa, Bigger, Hasbrouck, & Parker, 1996).

Relationships Between Teachers' Empowerment and Students' Learning

Teacher empowerment is considered as another crucial factor in predicting student academic performance (Wynne, 2001). Teacher empowerment has two dimensions: classroom and school (Glenn, 1990; Short, 1994). At the classroom level, when teachers are empowered, they set learning goals, adapt learning materials, use pedagogical strategies, deliver content knowledge, and assess students' learning progress. At the school level, an empowered teacher attends workshops for professional development, pursues a higher related degree, participates in school policy reformation, develops school curriculum based on school uniqueness, and participates in teacher organizations. However, the research evidence suggests that teachers who are empowered to design their teaching/learning goals and who worked closely and collaboratively with their school have a stronger and more positive impact on students' academic performance than teachers who are only participating in school-level professional development (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). Furthermore, in a study by Marks and Louis (1997), they found that there was no significant positive relationship between teacher empowerment and students' academic performance when the empowerment meant professional development at the school level only. They further argued that the empowered teacher may have strong self-esteem about their teaching capacities; however, without knowing students' learning difficulties first and then enacting differentiated teaching strategies, students' academic performance may not be improved. This means that the integration of these two dimensions of teacher professional development (e.g., classroom and school) is important in order for teaching and learning to be effective.

Even though there are studies that discuss the impact of parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) and teacher empowerment upon students' academic performance (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), few studies provide quantitative triangulation of results to show compelling evidence about the relationship between teacher empowerment, involvement of Hispanic parents, and Hispanic ELs' academic learning. This led us to conduct this study; the purpose of this study was to examine the effects and pathways of parental involvement, parent perceptions about school and teacher, teacher empowerment, and teacher professional knowledge on Hispanic ELs' learning. A path analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed to examine the following research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** Does Hispanic parents' involvement, in regard to their perceptions of schools and teachers, have a relationship and an impact on their children' learning?

Research Question 2: Does teacher empowerment, in regard to their professional knowledge about bilingual education practices, have a relationship and an impact on Hispanic ELs' learning?

Method

The survey data collected from students, parents, and teachers were analyzed using SEM through Mplus software. SEM is an approach to test the hypotheses between the observed and latent variables in the study. Mplus 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017) was used to determine if our empirical model (see Figure 1) is a good fit to our data. There are five latent variables: parental perceptions, parental involvement, teacher knowledge, teacher empowerment, and students' learning attitudes. Under each latent variable, there are two or three measured variables. For instance, under parental perceptions, the three measured variables were (a) interaction with schools about parental involvement, (b) interaction with teachers about parental involvement, and (c) interaction with programs about parental involvement.

Participants

A total of 339 low-SES Hispanic ELs, 339 corresponding parents, and 40 teachers participated in this study. The ELs, parents, and teachers were third- through seven-grade participants from six elementary schools and one middle school participating in a bilingual dual language program within one public school district. The school district was located in an urban city in the southwestern region of the United States. This school district serves a largely Hispanic student population, approximately 70% of the entire student population. Also, approximately 95% of the student population receive free or reduced-cost lunches.

Regarding the distribution of 339 Hispanic ELs by gender in our study, 40.1% were males and 59.9% were females. Student ages ranged from 8 to 13; their average age was 10 years. The distribution by grade level was 21.5% for third grade, 36.3% for fourth grade, 30.4% for fifth grade, 6.5% for sixth grade, and 5.3% for seventh grade. Among 339 participating parents, 57.5% were males and 42.5% were females. Their average age was 37 years. Among 40 teachers, 30% were males and 70% were females. They have been teaching an average of 7 years.

Instruments

A bilingual survey (Spanish/English) was developed for parents and students. In the case of the teachers, the survey was developed in English only. The surveys were triangulated and were mainly designed to gather (a) basic

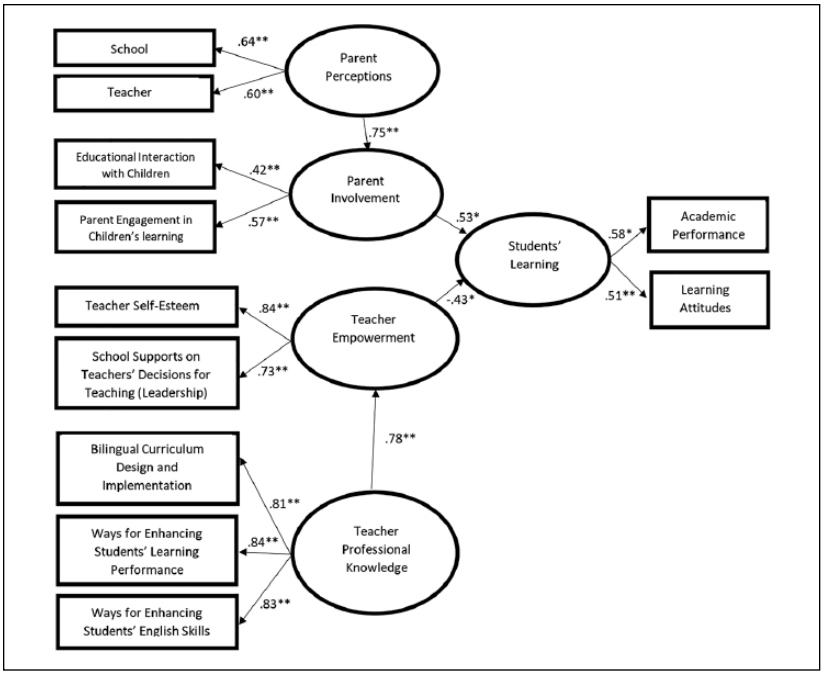

Figure 1. The empirical model with results from triangulation data (parents, students, and teachers).
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

background information, (b) systematic information on classroom/home teaching/learning environments, (c) systematic information on resources in the home learning environment, and (d) beliefs and attitudes toward bilingual education across the three data samples. Each survey contained 74 closed-items with a four-point Likert scale.

The survey contained closed items. A four-point Likert-type scale was used to answer questions on the construct of parent perceptions, parental involvement, teacher professional knowledge, teacher empowerment, and students' learning. The example of survey items and the Cronbach's Alpha values for each construct are provided below:

1. Parent perceptions:
   a. School: The school welcomes parents' comments/contribution. (*Cronbach Alpha = .910/8 items*)
   b. Teacher: My child's teacher promptly responds to my phone calls, messages, or emails (*Cronbach Alpha = .935/7 items*)

2. Parental involvement:
    a. Educational interaction with children: Do you and your child talk about the events of the school day? (*Cronbach Alpha = .725/5 items*)
    b. Parent engagement in children learning: When it is NOT required for homework, do you take the initiative to read with your child at home? (*Cronbach Alpha = .775/4 items*)
3. Teacher professional knowledge:
    a. Bilingual curriculum and implementation: I know how the English Language Proficiency Standards and College and Career Readiness Standards are aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and instructional materials (*Cronbach Alpha = .817/6 items*)
    b. Ways for enhancing bilingual students' learning performance: I know how to provide an interactive learning environment by using cooperative learning strategies. (*Cronbach Alpha = .866/4 items*)
    c. Ways for enhancing bilingual students' English skills: I know the basic concepts of language systems (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, semantics, discourse, and pragmatics). (*Cronbach Alpha = .835/5 items*)
4. Teacher empowerment:
    a. Teacher self-esteem: In my dual language classroom, I can assess students' comprehension in both languages. (*Cronbach Alpha = .711/6 items*)
    b. School supports on teachers' decisions for teaching: I received ongoing guidance from a mentor teacher. (*Cronbach Alpha = .780/4 items*)
5. Students' learning:
    a. Academic performance: Mark the statement that best describes your grades, so far, from classes this semester. (*Cronbach Alpha = .750/2 items*)
    b. Learning attitudes: When something goes wrong, do you try to find a solution? (*Cronbach Alpha = .713/7 items*)

Procedure

The procedure for the study involved three steps, including (a) survey development, (b) survey piloting, and (c) survey implementation.

Step 1 (survey development). To better understand areas of focus for each survey (i.e., parent, teacher, and student), we examined relevant literature on

family/home environment research (e.g., Peterson, Cobas, Bush, Supple, & Wilson, 2005; Ramsdal, Bergvik, & Wynn, 2015; Sad & Gurbuzturk, 2013; Urdan, Solek, & Schoenfelder, 2007), effective bilingual teaching practices (e.g., Tong, Irby, Lara-Alecio, & Koch, 2014; Tong, Lara-Alecio, Irby, & Mathes, 2011), and dual language program models (e.g., Collier & Thomas, 2004; Gomez, Freeman, & Freeman, 2005). Moreover, to develop triangulated items addressing educational experiences between parents, teachers, and students, we further examined literature on College and Career Readiness Standards (American Institutes for Research, 2014; Neri et al., 2016) as well as literature on English Language Proficiency Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2014; Texas Education Agency, 2007).

Step 2 (survey piloting). This step involved the piloting of the survey with two focus groups, one in Spanish and one in English, in an effort to do the final calibration of the instrument with elementary children from third through fifth grade. Similar procedures were followed with the teacher and parent surveys. These focus groups assisted us to adequately address any language ambiguity and/or revise poorly written items across all surveys.

Step 3 (survey implementation). The survey implementation involved the entire population of teachers, parents, and students from the Dual Language programs. Teachers at each school were asked to participate, and after signing consent forms, they were administered the survey. Parents received their survey through the classroom teacher who sent the parent's survey along with a letter explaining the study and adult consent/child assent forms for parents to sign. Upon obtaining all signed consent and assent forms, the survey was implemented among students in their classrooms. A trained bilingual member of our research team applied the survey to the whole class during a scheduled time already agreed upon with the teachers. In the case of students who had not assented or whose parents had not consented for them to participate, the teacher allowed for these students to work independently on homework or some other activities. Later, teachers gave parents' surveys along with their surveys to the research team. Regarding the implementation of students' surveys, students were read a short paragraph indicating the procedures and were also told that they had the choice to fill-out the survey either in Spanish or English. Furthermore, the survey was read aloud by the researcher in both languages. If the students needed clarification on any survey questions, the researcher stopped to explain. The intent was to provide students with ample opportunities and time to respond to the survey questions. The research team followed the same procedures across all classrooms visited.

Results

To examine the goodness-of-fit of the model, we adhered to several criteria for the analysis. This included that the chi-square needs to be nonsignificant, the comparative fit index (CFI) needs to be larger than .95 (Bentler, 1990), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) needs to be smaller than .5 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Through this analysis, we examined the direct effects on students' learning attitudes as a function of classroom and family environments. With the examination of causal relationships among the four latent variables, chi-square goodness-of-fit was used on the empirical model: the value of χ^2 was 53.11; the degree of freedom was 48; p value was larger than .05. The CFI and RMSEA of the model were .98 and .01, respectively. Due to the nonsignificant difference of the p value, the empirical model was found to be a good fit.

Effects on Students' Learning Attitudes as a Function of Parental Involvement and Parent Perceptions

The results showed a path in which parents' perceptions have a directional relationship with parental involvement while parental involvement had a directional relationship with students' learning attitudes. The correlation coefficient from parental perceptions to parental involvement was positive and strong (.75) with a significant value ($R^2 = .55$, $p < .01$; see Figure 1). The correlation coefficient from parental involvement to students' learning attitude was positive and moderate (.53) with a significant value. Moreover, the results showed that parental perceptions had a direct and positive relationship with parental involvement in children's academic activities at school. In other words, parental perceptions play a critical role in mediating students' learning attitudes.

Effects on Students' Learning Attitudes as a Function of Teacher Empowerment and Teacher Knowledge

There is a significant and positive directional relationship between teacher knowledge, teacher empowerment, and students' learning attitudes (see Figure 1). The standardized coefficient of the relationship between teacher knowledge and teacher empowerment was strong (.78) and significant ($R^2 = .63$, $p < .01$). The results showed that teacher knowledge was in direct and positive relation to teacher empowerment. The correlation coefficient from teacher empowerment to students' learning attitude was negative and moderate (.43) with a significant value.

Overall, the results also showed that 47% of the variance on students' learning attitudes could be explained by parental involvement and teacher empowerment. These findings are statistically significant ($R^2 = .47$, $p < .05$) in regard to the impact of both parents and teachers.

Discussion

The results showed that the parents' perception plays a significant role in positively mediating their children's learning through involvement in their children's learning. This indicates that Hispanic parents' perceptions influenced by teachers and schools influence their degree of willingness to get involved in their child's school-based activities and learning. When Hispanic parents get more involved in their children's learning, their children's academic performance and learning attitudes will be enhanced. These findings are consistent with the study of Dahl, Ceballo, and Huerta (2010) that parental involvement is critical to positively influencing children's academic performance at school. However, if parents perceive that the school and teachers are not encouraging their active participation, such negative perceptions will be detrimental to the children's learning attitude and academic performance (Parker et al., 1996). Therefore, Hispanic parents with low SES are strongly encouraged to actively and positively communicate with schools and teachers regarding their children's behavior at home. Also, the parents should use resources provided by teachers and schools to help their children keep pace with their peers in learning. Moreover, it is important for the parents to communicate with their children, and to establish routines and procedures that provide a respectful, positive, safe environment for the children that is conducive to learning. Such a supportive communication and relationship with Hispanic children with low SES may enhance their positive learning attitudes and later influence their perspectives about future post-education pathways (Auerbach, 2004; Lara-Alecio et al., 1997).

In addition, the survey results showed that when teachers primarily focus on professional knowledge attainment only, their empowerment does not have a positive impact on low-SES Hispanic ELs' learning. This finding indicates that even though teachers have strong self-esteem about their abilities and skills, and have strong school support for their decisions on teaching, low-SES Hispanic ELs' learning may not be positively enhanced. These Hispanic ELs often confront two major challenges: language proficiency and lack of resources for enhancing academic learning skills. Even though teachers' confidence about instructional skills and decisions for their students' learning may positively influence students' learning, teachers need to be cautious about how their instructional skills can be applied for low-SES Hispanic ELs' learning.

According to Colombo and Furbush (2009), a higher quality instruction should be based on students' language proficiency and teachers' instructional preparation. If teachers' instruction can be adapted to students' needs, it is believed that students' learning can be highly enhanced. Then, students are more likely to perform better and attend college (Chetty et al., 2011). For the teachers who have low-SES Hispanic ELs in class, we strongly suggest that they should use differentiated instruction to buffer those students for learning adjustment, as well as maximize instruction effectiveness.

The results further revealed that teachers must adapt into their teaching what they learn from professional training and workshops, if they hope to have a positive impact and a potential indirect effect on low-SES Hispanic ELs' academic performance. According to Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom (2010), teachers who join a teacher professional learning community will enhance their students' learning achievement. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to participate in a professional learning community hosted by schools, districts, or neighborhoods. Moreover, the learning community may lead teachers to a higher level of professionalism by helping them build their own pedagogical knowledge and evidence-based teaching practices. Also, the learning community may enhance teachers' professional autonomy; teachers may be motivated to innovate and develop pedagogical practices for their classes. This increased involvement by teachers will hopefully be reflected in their students' academic performance. Teachers are encouraged to acquire skills for systematically collecting and using relevant data, and then analyze that data to have a more comprehensive overview of student academic progress. Teachers can then develop a strategic plan to enhance students' academic performance. Teachers can also use the results to collaborate with schools and parents for enhancing the students' academic performance.

In conclusion, Hispanic ELs often find themselves in a disadvantaged environment where they are surrounded by extraordinary challenges to their well-being (Schneider, Martinez, & Ownes, 2006). Given the importance of both teachers' and parents' support on Hispanic ELs' academic performance, teacher empowerment and parental involvement may be possible avenues for enhancing these students' learning. In this study, regarding parental involvement, it is believed that higher levels of Hispanic parents' involvement in their children's school activities and programs will more positively influence their children's academic performance and educational attitudes. Moreover, it is important that schools and teachers express to Hispanic parents the important of their participation in the school and classroom. It is also important that positive educational dialogue start and be fostered in the home.

Teacher empowerment may have a negative impact on Hispanic students' learning when the teachers' instructional knowledge and practice cannot

support diverse student learning (Wu & An, 2016). Therefore, teachers are strongly encouraged to consider individual Hispanic ELs' learning needs when developing a differentiated teaching plan. After that, teachers need to implement the plan so as to more positively influence Hispanic ELs' academic performance.

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Author Biographies

Hector Rivera is an associate professor in the Bilingual Education Program of the Department of Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University. His research is focused on Latinx children, community development, learning environments, bilingual teacher professional development, and the efficacy of school programs in urban and rural settings. He has worked on projects addressing cultural and linguistic

development for students in diverse communities including Greenland, Peru, Mexico, and Guatemala. Moreover, he has worked with school districts in California, New Mexico, and Texas to build their bilingual language curriculum, as well as to offer professional development training for bilingual teachers.

Jui-Teng Li is a research specialist/data manager in the Bilingual Education Program of the Department of Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University. His research interests are: quantitative and mixed method research in cognitive learning and teacher education; educational program and curriculum evaluation; curriculum design in content areas; and cognitive literacy skills development. He also has over ten years of teaching experience, from elementary through university levels.