School Adaptation: A Triangular Process

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In this article, we present the results of a year-long, follow-up study through vignettes from four of the case studies carried out with a group of 16 first-grade, Spanish-speaking children whose families recently immigrated to the United States. During the 1995-1996 school year, we followed the unfolding of the school adaptation of the children, families, and teachers in the process. Through the findings, we seek to challenge traditional views of school adaptation that focus on the child, on the child and family, and, in the case of linguistic minorities or immigrant children, on their English proficiency. We present a comprehensive perspective of school adaptation that considers the child, family, and school and centers on various factors such as cognitive development, socialization, the cultural and political milieu, and family and teacher expectations. We argue for the role of a home-school mediator as a facilitator of children's adaptation to school.

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Traditionally, school adaptation has been understood as a linear process, and, when school adaptation difficulties have occurred, the family and/or child has been blamed. There are several shortcomings evident in this approach. First, there has been a tendency to interpret students' difficulties at school using a mental health paradigm and a moralistic and pessimistic perspective, instead of stressing the educational and pedagogical components implicit in the adaptation process (e.g., Barth & Parke, 1993; see Lightfoot, 1978; Moll, 1992). Second, adaptation has been understood almost exclusively in terms of academic success and child outcome (McDermott, 1987; Walker, 1987), focusing on one variable (cognitive development or outcome; e.g., Alexander & Entwisle, 1988) and on the child, disregarding the complex and interactionist nature of the adaptation process (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Broader conceptualizations consider social, political, cultural, affective, and cognitive factors as equally important aspects and facets of adaptation (e.g., Hamilton, 1983; Moll, 1992; Parker & Asher, 1987; Rohrkemper, 1984; Sternberg & Kolligian, 1991; Zigler & Trickett, 1978). Third, research on this topic has focused on various components, such as the child's abilities, classroom conditions, or family background, in an isolated fashion, failing to integrate all of them (Clark, 1983; see García, 1994; Jencks, et al., 1972). And fourth, research has concentrated on describing situations, without offering possible solutions.

Before the 1960s, the general expectation behind this traditional perspective was that, given a certain dissonance between the home and school environments, it should be the child, or the child and the family, who should carry out changes or develop school-appropriate behavior in order to come closer to the school culture (Hess & Holloway, 1984). During and after the 1960s, there began a gradual change in the emphasis among some of those interested in children's school adaptation. The focus began to shift from blaming the child and the family to involving the school in the picture as well. Gradually, it began to be expected that the school should also be involved in modifications to ensure more continuity between family and school in children's adaptation to school (Lightfoot, 1978). From this view, the school and community began to be seen as different cultures of equal value, and the burden of adapting was placed on the school or shared by the school and the family (Hess & Holloway, 1984). However, even today this shift in emphasis is not complete or shared by all.

In the case of children from immigrant families in the United States, language discontinuities between the home and the English-speaking school system have been considered, to date, as one of the major factors influencing school success (e.g., Amastae & Elías-Olivares, 1982; Barkin, Brandt, & Ornstein-Galicia, 1982; Fishman & Keller, 1982). The maintenance of children's native language is a very important part of their cultural identity; however, focusing on the language discontinuities merely in terms of school success reflects a narrowness in the understanding of children's adaptation to school and an attention to only one factor that could possibly affect this process.

Five basic approaches are found in the U.S. for the education of non-English speaking children: immersion, second language instruction, transitional bilingual education (TBE, or early exit bilingual programs), maintenance bilingual programs (or late exit bilingual programs), and two-way bilingual or dual language programs (sometimes known as integrated bilingual education. See Dicker, 1993; Lindholm & Aclan, 1991; Spener, 1988). Each one of these approaches focuses on children's language competence as the most important factor in children's adjustment to school in the U.S. For example, English immersion programs place children in English-only classrooms from the very beginning, with all of their classes being taught solely in English; in these programs, there is no kind of accommodation for the child's needs and no desire to help maintain or sustain the child's native tongue. Second language instruction programs usually focus on the English language taught as a subject itself, restricted to a few periods of class a week, and characterized by drills; this type of program restricts the learning of language to language as a subject class. TBE, a program implemented on a large scale in the U.S., is one of the bilingual programs that does use children's native tongue. Children's native tongue is used during a transitional period, until the child is assessed as competent enough in the English language to be placed in a mainstream class; it is a program designed to prepare students as quickly as possible for English mainstream. The goal of this program is to raise the English-proficiency of non-English speaking children so that they will be able to participate effectively in U.S. classrooms (Spener, 1988). Thus, the underlying assumption is that children's native tongue impedes their school success when, in fact, there are many other variables that play important roles. Moreover, it assumes that it is the child who must change and conform, not the school. Maintenance bilingual programs also use the children's native tongue, but they allow students to keep their native language ability while they learn English. The difference between this type of program and the TBE approach is that the use of the students' native tongue is not considered as a transition in the process of learning English but as an important part of the learning process that cannot be ignored. Two-way bilingual programs are those in which non-English speaking students and their English-speaking peers are taught together in the same classes in both languages, with each language being used independently and for sustained periods of interaction.

The language spoken at home and the language used for school instruction do certainly affect the school adaptation of Spanish-speaking children, but they are not the only factors that should be taken into account. Parents' level of education, immigrant status, parents' expectations and beliefs, parental role and disposition, socioeconomic status, and peer pressure are also important (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988, 1994; García, 1994; Ogbu, 1983; Suárez-Orozco, 1991; Trueba, 1989). Still, public school systems sometimes have gotten caught up entirely on the issue of language: whether bilingualism should be nurtured, whether the shift to English fluency should be required and expedited, and so on to the exclusion of other influential factors.
School Adaptation Reconsidered

A Framework for Describing School Adaptation

In an attempt to develop a theoretical framework to explain and describe the relationships between family, child, and school in the process of school adaptation, García-Sellers (1999) designed a conceptual model that illustrates different ways in which this process takes place for Spanish-speaking children at the beginning of elementary school (García-Sellers, 1999; Páez & Sellers, 1995). The model identifies tendencies of interrelated behaviors among family, child, and school. School adaptation is seen to be influenced by the expectations and orientation of the family, the child's cognitive and socioemotional characteristics, the degree of dissonance or match between the family and the school, and the support provided by the school. The model describes four most frequent possible modes of adaptation (see Figure 1 for an illustration of the adaptation model). The descriptions of the different modes focus on the child as our target and main preoccupation in this study. This focus in the descriptions in no way implies that the process of school adaptation should be referred exclusively to the child. As stated earlier, the adaptation process is a triangular process involving child, family, and school within the larger political, social, and cultural context, although the descriptions of the different adaptation modes may be focused on the child.

In the Unadapted (García-Sellers, 1999) mode, the child remains within the family's influence and encounters difficulties adapting to school. These children's home and school environments are totally distinct. Their families seek to retain their lifestyle and might not have a clear idea of the school's demands, while their teachers, unfamiliar with the implications of the children's behavior, are unable to help them overcome the disparity between the two environments.

In the Transferred (García-Sellers, 1999) mode, the child makes the transition to the school environment, losing or rejecting much of his or her parents' cultural heritage in the process. These children reject their home influence in order to succeed at school. Their parents are usually unclear and inconsistent in the support and cultural roles they provide to their children, while their teachers commend their school achievement, failing to recognize its negative effects on the emotional relationship with their families.

In the Adapted (García-Sellers, 1999) mode, the child develops two sets of behavior, trying to respond to family values and conform to school norms simultaneously. Children learn to manage and reconcile the subcultures of both their home and school environments, on their own, without the support from home or school.

Finally, the optimal adaptation mode, Adapted with Support, promotes communication between home and school so that there is some continuity between the two subcultures. If school and family build up overlap-
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ping values and goals, the child’s transition can be facilitated. Parents and teachers need to be mutually respectful but fully aware of the differences between their environments and develop ways to compensate for these differences. (García-Sellers, 1999, p. 5)

The model suggests that variables in the home background are important determinants of how readily the child will adapt to the school environment. Parental stress associated with acculturation, tension at home associated with parents’ gender role change, conflicting children’s socialization goals, attitudes toward children’s language use, and home-school relations are family variables related to children’s school success. The model considers that variables from the school environment, such as teaching style, teacher expectations, classroom schedule, curriculum, and classroom composition also affect the child’s adaptation to school and are, therefore, relevant. An overlap between both sets of variables is considered to be optimal in fostering children’s school adaptation.

As illustrated in Figure 1, there are three dimensions involved in the process of school adaptation: child, family, and school. In each one of the different modes, from Unadapted to Adapted with Support, there will not, necessarily, be an exact balance between the three dimensions. In some cases, it might be the teacher’s strategies and perspectives that are weighing most for the child’s school adaptation. In other cases, it might be the families,

or the children, that determine with greater weight the adaptation mode. Further, from one case to another, there will be different reasons for being in a certain adaptation mode. In different cases, the changes in the adaptation mode, or in the identification of a mode, can be based on a match between family and school, a change in the family, or a change in the child.

School Adaptation: A Year-Long Follow-Up

During the 1995-1996 school year, we carried out a year-long study that followed the adaptation process of a group of children, their families, and teachers. The study focused on two TBE, Spanish, first-grade classrooms at a public elementary school in an urban suburb near Boston, Massachusetts. This school has a large population of Latino children from immigrant families. The sample included all children in the first-grade TBE classrooms, except for those served by the Special Education program (two children in each of the classes). From the 28 children in the first-grade classrooms at the beginning of the study, 16 (8 from each class) were selected to participate in the follow-up. These children were considered to present most difficulties in adjusting to the school culture—based on their social interaction, classroom behavior, and adaptation to the class routines, schedule, and activities—as reported by observations, teacher interviews, and child interviews.

This study focused on the first-grade of elementary school, for research has shown that this is a critical period for family-school contact (Lightfoot, 1978). Patterns of relationship between families and school are established at this early stage (Barth & Parke, 1993; Lightfoot, 1978), and it is the ideal moment for carrying out a preventive mediation. It is by focusing on the early grades, instead of on the end of the process and the negative results of poor school adaptation (i.e., school dropout and academic failure), that we can develop an understanding of children’s difficulties in adapting to school (García-Sellers, 1999). In this way, this study developed and adopted an eminently positive attitude toward children’s opportunities and success in school.

During the study, one of us acted as a mediator between the family and school realms, seeking to understand the interactions and relationships that existed between children, family, and school. The mediator, a Latina of South American origin, worked throughout the year in the school in an unpaid position, and faculty, school personnel, families, and children were aware that the work being carried out in the school was related to her graduate studies. At the beginning of the school year, each of the 16 families was contacted and visited, in coordination with the school and with the meetings that were being carried out with the teachers. The purpose of these home visits was to establish a relationship and a dialogue with the families and to become familiar with their characteristics, needs, and problems. The intent was to gradually create a bond with the families that would make them feel more comfortable with the mediator and with the school environment. Then, throughout the school year, the home-school mediator continued to

Figure 1. Model of school adaptation. For the modal U.S. schoolchild, there is a large overlap between home and school culture which facilitates the child’s adaptation to school. For immigrant families, there is little or no overlap, thus requiring significant accommodation by the child in order to adapt.
visit and contact the families regularly. These contacts were always coordinated with the meetings that the mediator held with the teachers so that common themes could be worked on and consistent feedback could be provided to both.

During the meetings with the family, we discussed, for example, how they felt about the children at home and about their relationship with the school. In the school, we assessed teachers' perceptions of and relationships with the children through observations carried out in class, weekly meetings, and weekly log entries made by the teachers. Weekly meetings with the teacher of the classroom we will be focusing on explored, through discussions and readings of the log, changes that might have occurred in the children and in the teacher, in any direction. Questions about the cases were frequently presented to the teacher, with the suggestion of exploring those issues during the following week. These questions often led the teacher to reflect and think of the children from another perspective, or to explore different possibilities about the cases. In addition, the mediator also carried out individual interviews with the children and sociograms in which she explored the relationships between the children in each classroom.

The study sought to conceptualize how the dimensions of the children, the families, and the school interacted and evolved to facilitate, impede, or make the process of school adaptation a difficult one. Our hypothesis was that, if there was some continuity between the home and school subcultures, it would support the child's transition to school, as in the Adapted with Support model. In this mode, the continuity between home and school cultures makes possible the communication between them. By building overlapping goals and expectations, the child's transition to school can be facilitated. We did not expect that the continuity between home and school, and that the changes in the family, would in any way imply that the family should be mainstreamed or assimilated into U.S. culture. The support that the family could provide would be part of a concerted effort on the part of both family and school to come to some common expectations and goals for the child.

In the Adapted with Support mode, there were certain changes that we expected would occur in the family and the school, by the end of the school year, in order for the support and overlap to have developed. These changes depended, in part, on the children's initial adaptation modes. Regarding the family, their support toward the child's adaptation would include an increase in their communication with the child's teacher, a better understanding of what demands the school placed on the child, a positive relationship and image of the school, and learning about ways in which they could support the adaptation process. The school's support would include an increase in their communication with the family; a better understanding of the family's dynamics, of the child's characteristics, and of the needs and interests of both; and the learning of ways to facilitate the child's transition to school. School grades and report cards were considered, but they were not a central focus, given our understanding that neither they nor children's academic performance were essential aspects reflecting children's school adaptation. Our understanding was that the support provided by the family and school would take pressure away from the child and prevent the child from being the target of lack of common ground between the two environments. In this study, the learning and adaptation process of each child was promoted by the mediator, by providing simultaneous guidance and support to family and school.

In the following section, we will present vignettes from four of the case studies we selected from one of the TBE classrooms we worked with. The teacher of this class was a White middle-class male of U.S. origin, in his late 20s, who had been teaching in a Spanish bilingual first-grade class in the same school for the past 5 years. Each of the case studies presented will include information about the children, their families, and their teacher, focusing on the aspects that we consider were most important in their school adaptation. In each one of the case studies, our purpose is to present the unfolding of the process of school adaptation as it occurred throughout the school year.

Case Studies

Jessica
Jessica was a 7-year-old girl, born in an urban suburb near Boston. Her mother had immigrated from El Salvador to the U.S. 12 years before for political reasons. From age 3 to age 7, Jessica had lived with her grandmother in her mother's home country where she attended a Spanish-speaking school but did not complete first grade. At the beginning of the school year, we determined that Jessica was Adapted to the school environment, according to the adaptation model. It seemed that she could nevertheless benefit from support from her family and teacher which was consistent with her needs and which would permit her to become Adapted with Support, given that she would often get into fights with her peers and did not seem to be integrated with her group of peers. At the beginning of the school year, Jessica could only understand and communicate in Spanish.

Family
At the beginning of the school year, according to her mother, Jessica was sometimes bored by the work at school because she could already read and write and she perceived that the other children in her classroom could not. Her mother reported that Jessica loved doing school work, and, because her teacher still wasn't giving any homework, Jessica would give herself assignments, and stay up late at night doing them. Jessica also showed concern about forgetting her "lecciones" (recitations), which she had learned in El Salvador, and would regularly ask her mother, "Que me tome la leccion?" (to ask her to recite the lesson—which is part of the daily routine in many schools in Latin America).

Throughout the follow-up, Jessica's mother spent a lot of time fostering
her daughter's interests, by helping her put together stories that she wrote, and binding books she created. Jessica would then take to school these things she made at home with her mother's help. Her mother helped her through the transition to the new school system by first responding to Jessica's need to keep connected to her previous school's traditions by "tomando la lección" (asking Jessica to recite the lesson) as Jessica requested, so that she would feel confident that she was not forgetting all that she had learned in El Salvador, for example. But, thereafter, she gradually began responding to the requirements of Jessica's new school and began to allow her daughter to "make mistakes" as was being asked of her in the U.S. school. Jessica's mother was then building a quite clear bridge between both school cultures. During the follow-up, Jessica's mother also informed us that her daughter had stopped complaining about other girls fighting with her. On the contrary, Jessica often spoke about some of her friends and was constantly writing them letters and stories and asking her mother to buy them special gifts. Her mother said, "Esta niña me va a dejar en la bancarrota [This girl will leave me broke]!"

School

At the beginning of the school year, Jessica's teacher reported that she was sometimes disruptive, because she talked too much, and that she laughed at and teased her peers. In school, Jessica was mostly rejected by her peers. Since Jessica had already attended first-grade in El Salvador and knew the alphabet and how to read and write some words, she tended to stand out and show off in class. This teasing and showing off was most often the source of her peers' rejection of her.

At the beginning of the school year, Jessica's teacher perceived her positively because of her skills. Then, he began to realize that Jessica's skills were not what he had expected: While she could sound out the words she read, she did not always understand what she was reading, and she also found it difficult to use invented spelling or to create imaginative texts in general. Thus, he changed his perception of Jessica and seemed to believe that this was a fault in her. At the same time, he was unaware of what was going on in Jessica's home—for example, how hard she was trying to keep connected with her previous school experiences and also how different her new school was compared to her old one. Then, when we began discussing the fact that Jessica had probably attended a very different school in El Salvador where the expectations were different, and when we shared with him our own school experiences in Latin America, the teacher began to reflect that he could not really blame Jessica for her "weaknesses," and changed his perception of her. With this knowledge, he began to try to help her and support her, instead of blaming her or finding her at fault.

The meetings with the teacher focused on presenting other alternatives to the explanations that he gave for Jessica's difficulties at school. For example, thinking about what her previous school experience might have been like, what implications these differences might have, how Jessica might have felt having to go through first grade once again, and being slightly older than her peers.

As the school year progressed, and as other children in the class started to read and write, Jessica started to stand out less and less. As Jessica ceased to stand out, she also started to get into fewer fights, seemed to have more friends, and participated more in class discussions. It was noticed that, probably because of her previous school experience, Jessica found it hard to be as imaginative, creative, and inventive as her peers. By the end of the follow-up, however, Jessica had regained her initial status of skilled writer and reader and had been able to combine her previous school experience with the new expectations of imagination and creativity she was facing in the U.S., into a successful school experience. By the end of the year, Jessica was taking cognitive risks and writing creative stories with advanced vocabulary. When Jessica's schoolwork began to improve, she also developed a very patient attitude toward her classmates.

Regarding her use of English, her teacher was at first worried when, close to the end of the school year, she did not speak or respond to English, but he subsequently noticed that Jessica would use English only in those situations when the person she was speaking with knew no Spanish. Her understanding and speaking of English developed naturally within her home and school environments, without any special tutoring.

By the end of the school year, Jessica had progressed both cognitively and socially. She had become an excellent reader and writer and was socially accepted by her peers. Thus, she had become Adapted with Support to the school environment and a successful first-grade student. In order to achieve this, she had needed the support of both her family and teacher. In Jessica's case, it was the changes in her social and cognitive competence, as well as the support and match between home and school, which aided her school adaptation.

José

José was a 6-year-old boy who was born in the Boston area. His parents were originally from El Salvador and had been living in the Boston area for the past 7 years. At the beginning of the school year, we determined that José was Unadapted to the school culture, according to the adaptation model. He had not developed the necessary strategies for being successful at school and was not being fully understood by either family or school. Regarding his use of English, he was very eager to learn and speak English like his older siblings.

Family

At the beginning of the school year, in his family, José found it hard to stand out and find his place among his three other siblings. In addition, there was no match between his mother's expectations of him and his characteristics as a naturally cautious, timid person. His mother often compared him with
his siblings, blaming his academic difficulties on the fact that he was lazy and not as bright as the rest. José was not receiving any kind of support from his home that could facilitate his adaptation to school. At the time, José was lost both at home and at school. He had not yet been able to find his place in either. José was being pressed to succeed at school and simultaneously being shunned for not doing so. He received the message that doing well at school was positive but was not aware of how to go about achieving this.

During the follow-up, we focused the meetings with José’s family on stressing the fact that not all children are the same and that all people have different characteristics and aspects for which they stand out. We encouraged José’s family to think about ways their son was different from his other siblings and what things he could do well. We tried to have the family focus on what José could do, or his strengths, and not on what he could not do, or his weaknesses.

Thus, gradually, during the follow-up process, his mother began to develop a perspective of him that included his strengths and weaknesses. In addition, at the end of the follow-up, she sided with José when told that he was disruptive in class and was able to adopt his point of view—a breakthrough in her relationship with her son. She was proud of his accomplishments but also recognized which were his weaker areas. He still had to improve. For example, she recognized that he was not as strong in mathematics as in language. Moreover, she no longer placed the blame for José’s school behavior or performance on him but identified the school’s responsibilities (e.g., to help him with mathematics) and gave him support and encouragement.

School
At the beginning of the school year, José’s teacher reported that he lacked assertive social skills, was a bit talkative, sometimes used inappropriate language, and needed his teacher to solve conflicts. In addition, he mentioned that José had difficulties in writing and motor skills. In class, José had not been able to become engaged socially with his peers and remained mostly ignored by them. During class activities, José seemed to perceive that it was positive to participate and become involved in activities and thus tried to do so. But he encountered difficulties adjusting to what was being asked and to the purpose of the activities. He frequently raised his hand to speak, only to become flustered when he was actually called on and unable to respond. His motivation was mostly extrinsic because he completed activities and engaged in them to please others, not because he found them interesting, useful, or because he understood their purpose.

The meetings that were held with José’s teacher focused on issues similar to those which were being addressed with José’s family. José’s teacher was encouraged to think about what this child’s strengths were and what he could do well. We also suggested that he foster José’s development in the areas where he manifested strengths. In addition, we also discussed José’s disorientation regarding the requirements or expectations during school activities, brainstorming ideas about how he could become involved in activities with a thorough grasp of their intent and purpose.

During the follow-up, José’s teacher arranged for him to start working with an aide who provided reading and writing tutoring in a small group. He said his purpose was to encourage José’s improvement in reading and writing by practicing decoding skills. By the end of November, José had developed good phonics skills, and toward the end of the follow-up he had become “one of the best readers in the class, or at least the top half of the class,” according to his teacher. The kindergarten aide who had worked with José the previous year told his first-grade teacher, after working with the child, that she “was shocked at how much he has progressed since kindergarten.”

When José’s teacher began to identify some of José’s strengths, such as his eagerness to work and his love and compassion for his peers, and as his reading and writing skills began to improve, he made sure his mother was aware of this. He talked about this to his parents whenever he had a chance to do so and also during the parent-teacher conference. This led his mother to “beam with pride” during the first parent-teacher meeting and to say about José, “Este niño es muy listo, como su hermana [This child is very bright, just like his sister].”

In addition, José’s teacher would often give him positive feedback, individually and in front of the class. His teacher also made sure that José participated in class activities by calling on him when José put his hand up or asking him to participate. When José put his hand up but then did not know what to say, his teacher would give him time to think through his answer and would then congratulate him if he was correct.

Thus, gradually, José’s self-confidence began to increase. He no longer was passive academically: He was always eager to participate and read on his own, or he would raise his hand to do so. Socially, however, he continued being passive, avoiding conflicts as much as possible. When in extreme situations, he would say: “Stop,” to his peers, but he would never get into fights that involved physical aggression. José frequently let more aggressive children brush him aside.

Toward the end of the follow-up, José’s teacher noticed that he began to misbehave while he (the teacher) was not in the class. His teacher adopted a very active and self-motivated attitude toward “nipping this attitude in the bud,” as he described it, by talking “seriously” with José, monitoring his behavior closely, and calling his father so that he and José’s mother could talk to him. Eventually, José’s behavior improved.

By the end of the school year, cognitive and social strengths were identified in José. He had developed into a skilled reader and writer. Socially, he was a good friend and was extremely patient with his peers. Regarding his use of English, he could understand instructions and could speak some simple sentences, but he was not fluent.

In addition, José had become assertive academically, although not socially. Academically, José was always eager to participate, and he en-
gaged actively in activities. Socially, he usually did not defend himself from other children, and he tended to follow others, not lead them.

His teacher’s perceptions now included, as did those of his mother, both strengths and weaknesses. When explaining José’s misbehavior when he was not around, his teacher explained that he thought the problem was that the other teachers didn’t really “understand” José. They didn’t realize that he always participated and worked, but he did not always know what was expected of him. In this way, José’s teacher, like his mother, “stepped into his shoes” and was able to understand him and explain his behavior.

Therefore, José received the necessary support from his family and teacher to become Adapted with Support to the school environment. We were able to identify positive changes in his academic competence and attentiveness. Further, both his family and teacher identified the areas in which José had to continue to improve and developed perspectives of him that included his strengths and weaknesses.

Juan

Juan was a 6-year-old boy who was born in the Boston area. His parents were originally from Colombia. His mother disclosed to us, toward the final part of this study, that the previous year, in kindergarten, Juan had spent most of the time punished in a corner and that his kindergarten teacher had complained constantly about his behavior.

According to the adaptation model, we determined that Juan was Unadapted to the school environment because there existed a mismatch between his family’s and his teacher’s perception of him and because, at that time, his teacher viewed him in a negative light and had not been able to focus on his strengths, given that Juan’s ways of behaving and interacting were quite different from the norm. Juan started the school year understanding and communicating in Spanish only.

Family

At the beginning of the school year, Juan’s parents had been able to identify some of their son’s weaknesses and strengths. In addition, Juan’s parents had identified areas of weakness very similar to those identified by the teacher and through observation. Juan’s family identified his weaknesses as being shy, nervous, abandoning tasks easily, and not liking to be forced or obliged to do things. His strengths were identified as being imaginative and a quick learner. In spite of this, they had still not been able to find ways to help Juan in order to foster his strengths and overcome his weaknesses.

Throughout the school year, Juan’s family continued to show interest in their son’s schooling. His mother tried to establish relationships with other mothers and maintained a constant communication with Juan’s teacher. His family was always eager to hear how he was doing at school, were very interested in the teacher’s and mediator’s opinion regarding how they could support their son, and were always very receptive to suggestions. The suggestions, which were given to the family during the follow-up by the teacher and the mediator, centered mostly around how to help Juan to make the most of his strengths and how to find ways for his weaknesses not to interfere with his school life, academically or socially.

School

At the beginning of the school year, Juan’s teacher reported that he lacked motivation, would often act out, and presented difficulties focusing on some of the activities that he was presented with. In fact, Juan often participated in class—offering answers, suggestions, and opinions—and was eager to become involved in activities whenever he was interested. But, most often, he would not wait to be called on to offer his suggestions or opinions, and he did not seem to be concerned about pleasing others. His participation was not dictated or determined by what was going on in class or by his teacher’s request but by his own intrinsic interests and motivation. Juan was not always paying attention in class and seemed to live in a world of his own, creating stories and conversations. He liked to do things his own way and did not always respond to his teacher’s demands.

At the time, it seemed that Juan was a child who had academic strengths, was imaginative and creative, but whose ways of behaving and interacting were quite different from the norm. Juan’s teacher had certain expectations of what a student in his class should be like—namely, that he or she should wait to be called on, follow the teacher’s instructions, not talk at certain times, be quiet, and so forth. Juan’s behavior and temperament did not respond to these expectations. This mismatch did not facilitate Juan’s school adaptation.

During our weekly meetings, we encouraged Juan’s teacher to focus on which were this child’s strengths. During the follow-up, we constantly encouraged the teacher to shift his priorities by highlighting Juan’s strengths and shedding a different light on the behaviors which did not conform to the expectations held in the school.

During the follow-up, Juan manifested his increasing abilities in logic-mathematical and physical knowledge in diverse situations. He also began to show strengths in spatial reasoning, and he became one of the best and quickest children at putting puzzles together. He had an excellent sense of anticipation of what the pieces should look like. Until Winter Break, Juan’s teacher continued to display concern about his reading and writing skills. But after Winter Break, Juan made important progress in this area. Until then, he had made sense of written words through the context they were in, but, after Winter Break, he began to relate sounds and letters and became increasingly independent when reading and writing. He also became very proud of his work. By the end of the follow-up, Juan’s literacy skills were very good, and he was reading and writing on his own.

Throughout the follow up, Juan continued to disregard his teacher’s instructions and requests about putting his hand up when he wanted to say...
something, being quiet, and so forth. His behavior had become quite disruptive and his teacher often had to “call him to order.” In addition, he often bothered his classmates.

By the end of the school year, Juan had progressed considerably in the cognitive area. He was reading and writing independently, and he was an excellent mathematics student. Socially, he continued to have some difficulties: He was perceived negatively by many of his peers, and he continued to be disruptive. He continued to be an independent boy with a mind of his own and an intrinsic motivation. He often pestered his classmates and disregarded his teacher’s instructions. His use of English had improved, but he was not fluent and could only speak very simple sentences. He was very eager to learn English, however, and enjoyed imitating sounds and words in English.

Throughout the study, Juan’s teacher developed a more holistic perspective of him; he considered both his strengths and weaknesses and tried to actively help Juan overcome his difficulties. Moreover, he began to perceive both Juan and his family in a positive light.

However, Juan remained Unadapted to the school environment. In spite of his progress and the changes and support identified in the family and school dimensions, he had not been able to adjust to the school demands and expectations regarding behavior, and he continued to be perceived negatively by his peers.

Eduardo

Eduardo was a 6-year-old boy who was born in an urban suburb of Boston. His mother had immigrated to the U.S. 9 years before and his father 13 years before, both from El Salvador for economic reasons. He had attended a bilingual kindergarten classroom before entering first grade, where he was referred for a core evaluation for Special Education services. There was great concern about his social and interaction skills. His kindergarten teacher had suggested to Eduardo’s parents that he should be in a Special Education program and that he might be deaf and mute. Thereafter, the bilingual counselor worked regularly with him, and his mother and kindergarten teacher noticed improvements in Eduardo.

At the beginning of the school year, according to the adaptation model, we determined that Eduardo was Unadapted to the school environment. He was perceived as an extremely shy boy and remained a puzzle for both his parents and teachers. His teacher did not know how to deal with his shyness, and his parents could not make sense of why he had totally different behaviors with strangers in comparison to people he knew well (other children and family members). In addition, it seemed that his parents were still trying to get over the fact that his kindergarten teacher had suggested that Eduardo might have a disability (being deaf and mute). Regarding his use of English, Eduardo always spoke in Spanish, although he seemed to understand some instructions in English.

Family

At the beginning of the school year, Eduardo’s parents described him as a shy child outside of home and were worried because they did not know how to help him. “El me trae muchos problemas [He causes me a lot of problems],” his mother said.

We also assessed that Eduardo’s parents did not agree with many aspects of U.S. culture—including child-rearing practices, the values taught to children, children’s participation in daily routines, and the attention paid to clothing and appearance. They tried to keep their home lifestyle and values and to transmit them to their children. They were also strict with their children regarding what they could and could not do. For example, Eduardo’s mother stated that, although she wanted Eduardo to play with his peers in school, she was prohibited from giving his phone number to any person at school. She also said that she would not want for his classmates to call, visit, or play with him after school, “Yo no quería eso para mi hijo I would not want that for my child.” Although Eduardo’s parents realized that it would be beneficial for him to interact with other children, they were very hesitant to allow him to do so because they feared that they would influence him and teach him “bad manners” or ways.

Eduardo’s parents manifested concern over their child but also had rigid limits as to what they were willing to do to help their child. It seemed as if, at home, Eduardo was being constrained by his parents and then, at school, he was constraining himself. He did not allow himself to do anything. His temperament was probably that of a reserved and quiet person, but this was accentuated by the constraints set at home.

During the follow-up, we focused the meetings with Eduardo’s family on stressing all of his academic and social accomplishments at school. Every positive incident was related—if he had told a joke to a friend, if someone had chosen him as a playmate, if he had participated in a ball game—with the purpose of breaking through the rigid image that they had created of him. We also discussed the effects of constantly telling him, as they did, that he was shy and of telling people that he was shy whenever he was around others. We discussed how he might have fallen into this role and how difficult it could be for a young child to adopt a different role. In addition, we also discussed other people they knew who were shy, or quiet, finding that Eduardo’s father was or had been like his son.

By the time of final assessment, when describing Eduardo, his mother had shifted her focus from a concern on the social aspects to a concern on the cognitive ones. While she had started out the school year concerned about his shyness, during our final meeting she did not stress this area but talked about his being “behind” in writing. While she was still focusing on his weaknesses, she had taken pressure off his social performance and placed it on his academic competence.

School

At the beginning of the school year, during his first grade in elementary
school, Eduardo's teacher reported that he was extremely shy—anxious, lacked assertive social skills, presented difficulties in language and social skills, and was lacking in self-esteem and general comprehension. In class, Eduardo had difficulties interacting with his peers and with his teacher, and he rarely participated in class spontaneously. His pace was slow, he was more receptive than expressive, and he needed time to process information. At the time, Eduardo's academic strengths were difficult to perceive and evaluate in class because he was so quiet and self-contained.

During the course of the school year, Eduardo's teacher made great efforts at understanding and getting closer to Eduardo and described his achievements and strengths, as well as his social difficulties. He tried to call on Eduardo as often as he could, given that because Eduardo was so silent he could easily be ignored. Eduardo's teacher would also give Eduardo tasks where he did not have to face the whole class and prepared him in anticipation for these tasks. For example, before beginning an activity, he would say that Eduardo would be in charge of collecting the books after they had finished, and he would then remind Eduardo of his task when they finished. In this way, Eduardo was given time to prepare, and he was also faced with having to interact with each of his peers, asking for their books, but without having to face the anguish and challenge of confronting the class as a whole.

By the end of the follow-up, Eduardo had made progress in both cognitive and social areas. Cognitively, he was reading and writing, and he was a good mathematics student. In addition, he also showed interest in learning English. Socially, he interacted with other children during free play, especially outside of the classroom. Moreover, other children in the class had positive feelings toward him and mentioned that they liked to play, share, or have their snack with him. Regarding his use of English, his mother reported that Eduardo said that he wanted to learn English and liked it very much. He would respond promptly to instructions in English, spoke only Spanish at school, but used some words in English during our home visits.

At the same time, Eduardo still remained an extremely quiet child who frustrated his teacher's efforts to communicate with him. While this characteristic seemed part of his personality, the fact remained that it was necessary for him to adjust to some of the social requirements of the school environment in order to be successful.

By the end of the school year, we found that Eduardo remained Unadapted to the school environment because of social and interaction difficulties. He had not been able to adjust to the school's demands in this respect. Further, his mother was still focusing her descriptions of him on his weaknesses. At the same time, however, there was progress in his social and cognitive development and changes in his teacher's and family's perception of him. In addition, his family's feeling and relationship with the school changed. They started out the school year distrustful, and, by the end of the study, had positive feelings toward his teacher and the work that had been done with Eduardo.

Discussion

Children who tended to make the transition toward the Adapted with Support mode were those who were able to initiate changes in the direction of the school's expectations, with support from family and school, and whose family and teacher were able to develop holistic images of the child, which included their strengths and weaknesses.

In addition, it should be noted that the children's transition from one adaptation mode to another did not occur automatically and that the changes that occurred were not complete or perfect. What was identified was a movement toward another adaptation mode that could be recognized by the changes that had taken place in the children, families, and teacher. For example, parents of children who had made the transition toward the Adapted with Support mode went to school more often than before and communicated with the teacher, and the teacher tried to understand the child's behavior from the family dimension, as well as from the school and child dimensions.

Two significant findings were the importance of internal and external consistencies between the points of view on the child and the adoption of a holistic and ecological perspective for understanding the child. Internal consistencies refer to coherence between images of the child and interactions with the child—for example, the family describing the child as disruptive and acting accordingly, instead of saying that the child was disruptive but then never responding to the child's acting out. External consistencies refer to the overlaps and continuities between the points of view of the family and the teacher. These consistencies provide a supportive environment, encouraging the child's adaptation to school.

A holistic and ecological perspective refers to developing an understanding and view of the child that includes weaknesses, strengths, and social and cognitive aspects in an integrated fashion and not stressing some more than others. In this way, each child can be seen as a whole. For example, although at the end of the school year some of the children still presented difficulties in some areas, the teacher was able to perceive those difficulties, support the children in overcoming them, and at the same time perceive them within the context of their strengths and potentials.

Another issue that the case studies point to is the fact that adaptation cannot be understood exclusively in terms of academic success, as some researchers have suggested (e.g., Mc Dermott, 1987; Walker, 1987). Children's strengths and potentials on their own do not guarantee their adaptation and success. At the same time, there should be support and a common understanding from the family and teacher. As explained in the adaptation model (see Figure 1), when children are able to adapt to the school environment but do not have their family's or teacher's support, great pressure is put on the children, for they are expected to develop two different sets of behavior. Children who are able to do this have certain abilities and strengths that enable them to make this transition. But the optimal situation would be that
in which children are provided consistent support by family and school.

These case studies also point to the fact that the children's English language proficiency and their bilingualism were not the only factors that influenced their school adaptation, contrary to what has been suggested by some authors (e.g., Amastae & Elias-Olivares, 1982; Barkin, Brandt, & Ornstein-Galicia, 1982; Fishman & Keller, 1982). The case studies point to the fact that there are other factors, besides their language competence, that also affect children's adaptation to school, such as the continuity between home and family cultures, the communication between both, the understanding that the teacher has of the family and the child, and the understanding that the family has of the demands that the school places on the child. In addition, all these factors must be considered within the larger political and social contexts in which they take place. For example, in the case of Jessica, she started out the school year as Adapted, according to the adaptation model, in spite of the fact that she spoke no English and had only recently arrived to the U.S. However, she was at least slightly adjusted to the demands of the school in terms of academic requirements at that time. In the case of Juan, in spite of the fact that he could speak and understand English and that his family supported his learning of English, by the end of the school year, he still remained Unadapted to the school culture, according to the adaptation model, because he had many difficulties in adjusting to the school demands and expectations in terms of behavior. Thus, children's bilingualism and English-language proficiency are very important, but there are also other factors that influence their school adaptation. Their bilingualism and English language proficiency must be taken into consideration together with the myriad of other factors that include the overall social context that permeates their schooling and education. Therefore, programs that seek to facilitate immigrant children's adaptation to school must be aware of the importance of the children's native language, as well as considering other factors that affect their adjustment to the school environment.

As found by Brenner (1985) and de Abreu (1995), it was the children who developed strategies that combined their home and school experiences, and not those who remained within the realm of their home or school culture, who were most successful. This is exemplified through the case of Jessica. Her previous school experience in El Salvador had been one of repetition, copying, and memorizing. She was used to being asked to "recite the lesson" which she had learned for that day. When she started first grade in the U.S., she felt she was forgetting all that she had learned because she wasn't being asked for her recitations and resorted to repeating them and giving herself assignments at home. This previous experience, however, was not the type that she was being asked for at school: At her new school, she was being asked to use her imagination and creativity (e.g., through invented spelling); thus, at the beginning of the school year, she felt at a loss. By the end of the follow-up, Jessica had been able to combine her previous school experience with the new expectations of imagination and creativity that she was facing and was considered to be a skilled reader and writer by her teacher.

In addition, the results of this study also indicate the importance of the strategies of mediating meanings and reframing behavior in fostering and facilitating children's learning and adaptation to school. As expressed by Amatea and Sherrard (1994), the mediation of meaning "can assist the observer in seeing that a particular interpretation is only one among many possible versions" (p. 12). Reframing behavior refers to a strategy that allows people's views to change from negative to positive, by changing their views about a situation (Fine, 1992). Reframing behavior constitutes an important strategy in creating connections and building continuities between home and school by helping both to view the child and his or her difficulties and weaknesses from another perspective and to perceive that their perspective is one among other possible ones.

Through these case studies, the role that a mediator can play in children's adaptation to school was also illustrated. Mediation plays an important role in facilitating the child's transition from one culture to the other by helping to develop common perspectives and an area of overlap between home and school. The mediator's role in the development of this holistic perspective was instrumental for the children's school adaptation. The mediator's role included promoting the communication between family and school, helping to build overlapping or common goals and expectations, as well as helping to build common perspectives to understand the child. The mediator tried to help the family to feel more comfortable at school, to develop a better relationship with the teacher and school, and to be aware of the child's characteristics. The mediator also tried to encourage the teacher to better understand the needs and characteristics of the family and child and to become personally involved in each child's progress. The results also indicate, as Johnson (1994) has suggested, that, although schools are in the best position to initiate communication, when the school's attempts to communicate with the family are difficult, it is important to rely on other mediating structures that can help connect the two. In such cases, it is important for the mediating role to be carried out not by the child or the teacher but by an external person.

Parents who had been involved in the study identified that the mediation was helpful because it facilitated the communication of what was happening at school. It connected the family and the school because the home visits created a link between home and school that provided the children with greater trust due to the "outider" and nonthreatening perspective that was provided. Overall, the parents exposed to the study felt more satisfied with their children's schooling; they identified progress in their children; they were not as worried about their children; and they felt positive about the next school year. The mediator's presence in the school and the mediator's home visits had a positive effect in allowing the families to feel more comfortable with their children's schooling and education. For example, at the end of the school year, parents reflected about their involve-
ment in the study. Two of the parents' reflections illustrate the mediator's role in the support provided to the families:

Eduardo is very shy, but Bárbara knows that. Bárbara is telling me how Eduardo is doing and she comes and visits me. I think that because of that (the home visits) and because he then sees her at school Eduardo has developed more trust and is more comfortable. (Brizuela, 1996, p. 75)

It's a great help. I am a young mother, and she tells me how my daughter is doing, and it is good for someone to do that. (Brizuela, 1996, p. 75)

In addition, the teacher identified that the mediation was helpful because it facilitated and fostered the communication and his relationship with the families and the community. It encouraged him to reflect on his teaching and on the individual students, to think about the students as individuals, and to think about their individual needs and progress. The teacher stated:

I know the families much better, and they know me and the school community better . . . . I certainly learn incredible amounts about Central American culture, values, language, et cetera every year. Bárbara's involvement has facilitated that.

The relationship between teacher and parents is often problematic. Bárbara has helped serve as a mediator in this relationship, asking questions, et cetera that I may not feel comfortable asking.

In addition to such direct help, the study forces me to be a reflective practitioner. Even though I write infrequently in the notebooks [the logs], it is more than I would otherwise do. The meetings with Bárbara also make me reflect on my practice and the individual progress and needs of the students.

It encourages me to think of the kids as individuals, especially in the case of shy or unamusing kids, the kind who usually would have "slipped through the cracks" of my consciousness. (Brizuela, 1996, pp. 76-77)

Who could adopt the role of mediator is an area that could be further explored. Could the mediator be a teacher who shares the students' and families' cultural and language background? Moll (1992; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Moll & Whitmore, 1993) has previously described ways in which teachers can mediate between the home and school environments and requirements within instructional and school settings. Or would it be more appropriate for the mediation to be carried out by a person outside the realm of the school? Initial results seem to indicate that the outsider status offered by a person who does not belong to the school system is valued by both teachers and parents. However, in the long term, this type of mediation could have important preventive effects because the mediator could become increasingly irrelevant as families and schools themselves facilitate the adaptation process. In this process, the mediator should gradually transfer his or her role to the teacher and family, so that they can mediate between home and school cultures. The long term purpose of the mediations shall in fact be to facilitate transitions and learning, so that those concerned in the process (families, children, and school) can carry them out on their own in the future. Ideally, then, in the long run, families and schools could develop mediating roles. Thus, teacher educators should be aware of the importance of facilitating children's transition to school and of the role of mediators.

Conclusions

The results of the study indicate the value of adopting a psychopedagogical perspective toward understanding children's functioning within the school combined with the conceptualization of their adaptation to school through the adaptation model (García-Sellers, 1999). The adaptation model helps us understand the dynamics of the interrelation between child, family, and school. The psychopedagogical model aids us in facilitating changes in those dynamics and relationships.

Current efforts related to the present study include implementing similar mediating interventions in kindergarten, second grade, and third grade, as well as following the children in this study in order to analyze the long term effects of the mediation and to continue the mediation in the cases of children who did not progress toward the Adapted with Support mode. The follow-up of the children in this study would also be able to indicate whether their adaptation to school is contextual and ecological or if it can be considered to be a generalized achievement—that is, if having adapted to the first grade implies having adapted to school in general or if the child has only adapted to that specific class, teacher, and context. Initial hypotheses indicate that adaptation is contextual and ecological and that children who progressed toward the Adapted with Support mode cannot be expected to be adapted in their second grade or later. The continuities between home and school that facilitate children's adaptation to school cannot be transferred from one school grade to another, for example. Future study will explore in greater depth the role that home-school mediators can play in children's adaptation to school in the long term.

In conclusion, the present study validates the position that an increase of support from family and teacher, facilitated by a home-school mediator, can improve the child's adaptation to school. The increase of support resulted from an increased communication between family and school. The families developed an understanding of the school's expectations as well as
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a positive relationship and image of the school. The teacher developed an understanding of the family dimension and how it affected the children and an understanding of the children and their characteristics.

Notes

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1See Spener (1988) for a detailed critique of TBE, where political and social issues are also addressed.

1In some Latin American and European countries, psychopedagogy is a self-standing profession. In fact, the person assuming the role of mediator in the study described in this article was not herself a psychologist but a teacher and psychopedagogue by training.

1In the context of this article, by focusing on four children from the same classroom, we will not be taking into account the teacher variables and differences that we consider also affect children’s school adaptation.

These students were excluded so as not to interfere with specific recommendations developed in Individualized Education Programs (IEP).

Each teacher kept a log about each one of the children included in the study. The entries were mostly spontaneous, although the teachers were asked to include some comments about the children at least once a week. The content of the entries was also open, although many times the teachers included issues that were being discussed in the weekly meetings with the mediator.

References


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