

Early Childhood Care and Education Experiences of Low-income Immigrant Families

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Key findings:

- Immigrant mothers looked for ECCE programs that were: recommended by a trusted individual; bilingual; diverse
- Immigrant mothers used a variety of social, organizational and geographic connections to find ECCE
- Cost, wait lists, documentation of residence, and understanding of eligibility, particularly for child care subsidies, were among the most common obstacles to care
- Language of instruction, communication, provider attentiveness were the most important aspects of immigrant families' ECCE experiences

Children of immigrants¹ are the fastest growing segment of children in the U.S.², with nearly one quarter of children under 18 having at least one foreign-born parent³. On average, immigrants experience higher rates of poverty and lower levels of education than native-born individuals³. In addition, a significant proportion of immigrants have limited English proficiency³. These characteristics place children of immigrants at risk for lower academic achievement⁴.

Research shows that attending high-quality early childhood care and education (ECCE)⁵ in the year before kindergarten can alleviate these risks for poor academic outcomes^{6,7}. According to a national study, 58% of immigrant children were in a center-based ECCE setting in the year before kindergarten—however 75% of children with native-born parents were in ECCE one year before kindergarten⁷. Given the significance of ECCE to immigrant children's developmental outcomes, it is important to understand immigrant parents' experiences selecting and utilizing ECCE.

This brief aims to shed light on these issues by providing results from a study of 40 immigrant mothers from Latin America and Africa utilizing Head Start and universal pre-kindergarten programs in the Washington, DC metro area⁸. It focuses on characteristics of ECCE important to these mothers, their enrollment in ECCE, and their experiences with various ECCE arrangements.

Choosing ECCE

Many of the characteristics immigrant mothers in this study considered important when selecting ECCE for their children reflected those of native-born mothers⁹,

including: cost; location; hours of operation; size, cleanliness, and security of the facility; and, having a knowledgeable and caring provider. However a few characteristics that immigrant mothers considered in selecting ECCE for their children were slightly unique from native-born mothers' desires⁹.

First, 27 mothers (67%) indicated wanting to find an ECCE provider that was recommended by a trusted individual. This is similar to how many native-born mothers find child care, relying on information from their network of family and friends. The mothers in this study sometimes relied so much on these social connections to find care that they did not consider any other ECCE options beyond what their network members recommended. However, what seems unique to these immigrant mothers compared to native-born mothers is their use and trust of acquaintances from similar cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In particular, these mothers felt bound to other immigrants because they were from the same countries of origin, spoke the same languages, and experienced the same immigration and economic hardships. Consequently, it was not uncommon for these mothers to use weak ties¹⁰ including asking other women of similar backgrounds, who they only knew for a short while, to help them find trusted ECCE. When Elsa, a Mexican mother of two, was in a bind because she was starting a new job and all of the ECCE programs in her neighborhood were full, she asked the Latina who cleaned their building if she knew of any babysitters:

“Well, I asked the lady that cleaned my building where we lived if she knew of anyone that took care of kids and she gave me the number. I called and asked if she could take care of her.”

Elsa hired this person who ultimately cared for her daughter for two years.

Second, finding a bilingual program or a program in which the providers spoke multiple languages was particularly important to Latinas. Specifically, they preferred these programs over monolingual Spanish and monolingual English programs because it would help their children learn English in preparation for kindergarten, and at the same time they could maintain Spanish. In addition, bilingual programs in which the parents' native languages were spoken allowed for easier communication between parents and providers without translators.

Data and Methods

Data were collected from 40 first-generation immigrant mothers (19 from Africa and 21 from Latin America) whose children were enrolled in one of three NAEYC accredited Head Start or universal pre-kindergarten programs at the time of the study. Semi-structured interviews focusing on mothers' immigration experiences, as well as their experiences parenting in the U.S. and utilizing American ECCE providers, lasted between 2 and 3 hours, were digitally audio-recorded. Interviews with Latinas were conducted in Spanish; interviews with Africans were in English.

Mothers were 32 years old on average, and had approximately two to three children. All of the families' were considered low-income with earnings falling below the federal poverty threshold. Mothers had been in the U.S. for nine years at the time of the study, on average. For just over half of the mothers this was their first child; while six mothers had children who remained in their countries of origin. Ten of the mothers were undocumented at the time of the study; however all but one focal child were U.S. citizens. Three quarters of the sample were married or cohabitating with the focal children's fathers at the time of the interview. The majority of mothers were employed either part time (n = 6) or fulltime (n= 25), with a few Latinas holding two jobs.

Data were coded in three waves: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding¹¹. Atlas.ti, a qualitative data management software program, was used during these coding processes. The investigator began with sensitizing concepts related to the research question including parenting beliefs and practices related to ECE, parenting advice, and gains from ECE. A constant comparison method was used throughout open coding, such that paragraphs of text were read and then compared with previous text to determine if a new category or code should be created. This phase of coding yielded 15 codes. During the second phase of analyses, axial coding, each of the salient categories or codes that emerged during open coding were examined by looking across cases to understand the various dimensions of each category¹¹. For example, a code that emerged during open coding was "emotional support", consequently, during axial coding all the blocks of text related to this code were gathered from each participant using Atlas.ti. These pieces of coded text were read to understand and code for the various dimensions of emotional support. Finally, during selective coding, the last phase of analyses, the main "story underlying the analysis,"¹¹ emerged reflecting immigrant parents' experiences with their children's ECCE programs.

Third, some mothers indicated the diversity of the program as particularly important--something that native-born parents may consider important as well. However, as immigrants, these mothers believed a diverse program with children from varied ethnic and linguistic backgrounds would help their children acculturate more easily and quickly, because they would have opportunities to learn more about families from different cultural backgrounds. Halima an Egyptian mother of two described this:

"...how to communicate with other kids because he always saw Arabic families and I want him to learn [about] other cultures and religions."

The mothers in this study considered a variety of characteristics in choosing ECCE for their children. However many low-income native-born mothers⁹, they were often forced to think about the cost and location of the program before considering the actual program including the facility, staff, and curriculum.

Securing ECCE

Mothers used social, organizational, and geographic connections to find and secure care for their children. The majority of parents—25 out of 40—used social connections, or relied on their friends, family, neighbors, or employers to help them look for and enroll their children in ECCE. Often these social connections not only made mothers aware of the existence of trusted ECCE programs, but many times mothers used these connections to help them complete necessary enrollment paperwork, including applying for government subsidies and/or Head Start. Juliana, a Guatemalan mother of one,

described the support she received through a social connection:

"So since a friend of mine had her daughter at La Casita del Saber, I said how did you do it because those day cares over here cost so much money. And she said, 'no, La Casita del Saber is a place where you can take your kids and qualify for a voucher...help they give kids who were born here...if you want we can go and do the papers.' She took me...and I didn't know, otherwise I would have entered my son in day care a long time ago...and now he is three years."

There were 17 mothers who discussed organizational connections to finding and securing ECCE. Specifically, they relied on social service programs, pediatricians, ECCE programs, the public library, as well as other activities in which their children were enrolled to learn about ECCE options for their children. This connection consisted of seeing fliers at local clinics or public assistance offices, as well as receiving direct support from social workers connected with the local departments of health and human services.

Lastly, nine mothers mentioned learning about ECCE options through geographic connections—or finding ECCE programs by looking around their immediate neighborhood. Parents took notice of new programs as they walked to work or to the grocery store. A few parents even mentioned receiving fliers from ECCE programs as they walked to the metro.

Despite using social, organizational, and geographic connections immigrant mothers faced obstacles to enrolling in the ECCE programs they desired. Over half

(n = 24) of the families were placed on waitlists at some point during their children's earliest years. For some these waits were only a few weeks while for others the wait was a few years. Being on a waitlist impacted mothers' abilities to attend school and work outside the home. In addition, for mothers whose employment was not flexible, being on a waitlist meant finding other ECCE arrangements—often of lower quality— during the interim.

An obstacle that was somewhat unique to immigrant families was documentation regarding residence that was required for entrance into most center-based ECCE programs. Mothers mentioned this as an issue because they recently moved and did not yet have documents to prove their residence; while others were living with friends in their basements or spare bedrooms, and did not have a lease, and in turn, documentation to prove residence. Marisa, a Salvadoran mother of one, and her partner Pedro, from Mexico, shared their frustration regarding this:

“...there are too many challenges, too many obstacles to get into the program. First of all they ask for too many papers, you have to prove everything....the landlords don't give us any papers to sign and they pay water and electricity so we don't have any bills in our name. It is special for us Hispanic immigrants because a lot of people don't have papers, so that's why they can't rent an apartment because you have to show proof you are legal. That's why we try to find rooms in houses, and the landlord don't ask for anything...the school, the system, they ask too much.”

A final obstacle that these immigrant mothers faced in securing child care for their children was knowledge of and qualifying for subsidized and free child care. This is an obstacle often faced by native-born parents. However unique to these mothers who were immigrants was not their limited knowledge of the availability of government support for child care, but rather for those who knew about this support thought they were not eligible because of their immigration status. Others indicated concern about accepting government support in the form of child care subsidies for fear of becoming ineligible to receive citizenship later in life.

“...since the beginning I didn't know anything about the help that the government gave. When you start here, you think that one doesn't have the help of the government, for being an immigrant... so we paid for everything with our salary.”

ECCE Experiences

Immigrant families in this study utilized various types of ECCE during their children's early childhood years (birth to age 5) [33 used Head Start; 17 used informal

family, friend and neighbor care; 11 used center-based care; 7 used a universal pre-kindergarten program; 2 used ECCE in their countries of origin; and, 1 used home-based child care]. Across these arrangements, which sometimes lasted years and sometimes lasted only days, mothers coped with varying levels of quality child care.

Parents indicated both positive and negative experiences in relation to their current arrangements in either Head Start or a center-based, universal pre-kindergarten program. Most mothers were pleased with their children's learning and development. However some mothers were disappointed that their children did not yet possess all the skills they deemed necessary for kindergarten including writing their names and beginning to read. In addition, other parents were concerned that their children were being taught by teachers whose native language was something other than English. Halima commented:

“Now anyone can work in Head Start...the English level [of this teacher] is worse than mine and she works there now. How are kids going to learn if their teacher doesn't speak English?”

This is a concern more common to immigrant parents⁹ as they often sought out ECCE specifically for their children to learn English before kindergarten.

Mothers mentioned the importance of communication with their children's ECCE programs. Particularly among Latino parents this was considered an essential component of ECCE—they liked feeling “in tune” with their children's progress and feeling welcome to come into the classroom anytime. However some parents indicated that daily written communication from their children's teachers would be helpful. This was mentioned in relation to situations in which there are different teachers in the classroom throughout the day, and the teacher on duty at the end of the day often did not have a sense of the children's experiences throughout the entire day. Despite thinking this was important mothers were often hesitant to say anything to the teachers or directors. Yenee, an Ethiopian parent of three, described the challenges with advocating for her children and herself:

“That's like the immigrant parents' problem. If we say something we don't think we have the power. Yeah, but like Americans they know they are right so they get respect. For [immigrants], we did not come from this kind---nobody cares about your rights. We came from Africa.”

Mothers also took notice of how attentive ECCE providers were with their children. This was especially true among a few of the mothers whose children had health issues. Isabel continued to enroll her daughter, Ana, who was being treated for Leukemia, in a particular ECCE program because of how involved and caring the

teachers and staff were. This was especially important because Isabel thought that due to Ana's illness and her treatments, she had regressed developmentally, and consequently needed extra attention.

Prior to their current ECCE experiences in NAEYC accredited, federally-funded programs, many mothers struggled with a range of irresponsible and untrained child care providers. Mothers recounted providers who consistently arrived late to care for their children so that the mothers ultimately had to quit their jobs. At the extremes, some allowed another adult, not approved by the parents, to care for the children, or perpetuated abusive or neglectful behaviors, shaking the child or not changing diapers.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings indicate the **importance of immigrants' social and organizational networks** in selecting and securing ECCE for their children. In particular Latina mothers utilized both strong and weak ties within their ethnic communities to learn about trusted care and early education for their children—and often only considered care options recommended by someone in their network. However in addition to strong social ties, African mothers often used organizational connections through public assistance offices, public libraries, and local health clinics to learn about ECCE options. **Practitioners and programs may utilize these networks to provide information on ECCE and other areas of parenting.** In particular, utilizing immigrants' social networks through the use of cultural brokers or individuals trusted in these networks who may act as liaisons between parents and ECCE programs may be particularly important to reaching undocumented families who are otherwise disconnected from U.S. institutions.

Language of providers was something mothers considered important in choosing ECCE. Many preferred bilingual programs because these enabled their children to learn English, which mothers considered important as children transitioned to school, as well as to maintain their families' native languages. Also, this helped with mothers' communication with their children's ECCE programs. Among monolingual programs, mothers were concerned when their children were not interacting with native English speakers, as they worried their children would not learn proper English. This was of particular concern to some of the African parents. Given these findings it is important that whether a program is monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual they **hire teachers from diverse linguistic backgrounds who are able to effectively communicate with families in their native tongues, and who are fluent in English.** This may be less of an issue for teachers in bilingual or multilingual programs in which they are language models for languages other than English, and consequently do not interact with children in English.

Diversity of the program was another area that mothers remarked was important, particularly in terms of helping their children learn about other cultures. From

this standpoint, **immigrant mothers consider ECE programs a place of acculturation for their children and families.** Thus it is important that ECE program recognize and embrace this role by facilitating interactions among diverse children and families.

Finally, mothers faced challenges related to enrollment. There were **long waiting lists** to enter programs, sometimes lasting more than three years because of limited availability of Head Start and other subsidized ECE programs. These mothers' experiences reflect national figures—only half of eligible children are served by Head Start¹²—indicating a need for additional funding for Head Start and other subsidized ECE programs.

In addition, **mothers faced difficulties in enrolling their children particularly in relation to documentation of residence.** Consequently, decreasing the amount of paperwork needed as well as adjusting the type of acceptable documentation for proof of residence might be important for publicly funded programs, and particularly those that work with immigrant families, to consider.

Lastly, **some mothers did not know about child care subsidies** despite being linked with other public programs like Head Start. However they often needed these vouchers for summer care and wrap around care. In turn, at the state level child care administrators need to consider other methods for informing parents of these child care voucher opportunities by using parents' social and organizational ties.

¹ Children of immigrants and immigrant children are used interchangeably throughout this brief. These terms are defined as children with at least one foreign-born parent. For all the children in this study, both parents were foreign born.

² U.S. Census as cited by Matthews, H., & Ewen, D. (2006). Reaching all children? Understanding early care and education participation among immigrant families. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy.

³ Hernandez, D.J. (2009). Generational patterns in the U.S.: American Community Survey and other sources. <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Education/paradox/documents/Hernandez.pdf>

⁴ Kao, G., & Tienda, M. (1995). Optimism and achievement: The educational performance of immigrant youth. *Social Science Quarterly*, 76, 1-19.

⁵ Early childhood care and education (ECCE) and child care are used interchangeably throughout this paper to refer to any type of non-parental care setting. When necessary the specific type of ECCE will be noted (eg.: center-based; home-based; family, friend and neighbor (FFN))

⁶ Gormley, W.T. (2008). The effects of Oklahoma's universal pre-Kindergarten program on Hispanic children. Washington, DC: Center for Research on Children in the U.S.

⁷ Magnuson, K., Lahaie, C., & Waldfogel, J. (2006). Preschool and school readiness of children of immigrants. *Social Science Quarterly*, 87(5), 1241-1262.

⁸ See the methods box on page 2 for greater detail on the methods used for this study.

⁹ Chaudry, A., Pedroza, J.M., Sandstrom, H., Danziger, A., Grosz, M., Scott, M., & Ting, S. (2011). Child care choices of low-income working families. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

¹⁰ Granovetter, M.S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360-1380.

¹¹ La Rossa, R. (2005). Grounded theory methods in qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 837-857.

¹² <http://www.preknow.org/policy/headstart.cfm>