

Capitalizing On Early Childhood Education: Low-Income Immigrant Mothers' Use of ECE to Build Human, Social, and Navigational Capital

Colleen K. Vesely, Ph.D.

Marriam Ewaida, M.Ed. Katina B. Kearney, M.Ed.

George Mason University

Key findings:

- **Immigrant mothers built important capital, or resources and connections for navigating U.S. society through their children's ECE programs.**
- **Immigrant mothers relied on their children's ECE for work and education supports, as well as social and material supports**
- **Social relationships with other mothers and staff provided logistical, emotional and informational support.**

With close to 60% of children of immigrants in early childhood education (ECE) one year before kindergarten¹, studies indicate that ECE supports children's development and parents' employment. However recent work indicates that ECE may serve a third function of addressing issues of integration of diverse cultures by fostering inclusion and acceptance among young children and their families^{2,3}. This may be particularly important for low-income immigrant families as they integrate into and learn to navigate U.S. society.

ECE is uniquely situated to support immigrant families as they adjust to U.S. society. Specifically, ECE is often the first child and family institution with which immigrant parents have an on-going, daily interaction, and thus it becomes a trusted entity in families' lives. ECE is a somewhat protected space in which families have the opportunity to meet other parents^{2,3} and learn important information from their children's teachers. Moreover, early childhood education is suited to foster the development of various aspects of capital necessary for immigrant parents of young children. More than any other child-and family-related institution or organization (e.g., hospitals, social welfare programs, compulsory schooling) ECE is often the first institution that immigrant parents interact with on a daily basis over long periods of time—usually a year or more. Also, these programs and providers care for children during their youngest and most vulnerable years, which are often the years in which mothers need a lot of emotional and physical support creating a special sort of intimacy between families and their ECE providers.

In this brief we use qualitative interview data from 40 low-income, first generation immigrant mothers living in a large metropolitan area to answer the following research question:

How do low-income immigrant mothers use their young children's ECE programs to build various types of capital necessary for parenting in a new culture?

Mothers' Use of ECE to Build Human Capital

Human capital generally refers to personal characteristics, skills, and capabilities that influence financial well-being. These include education, and among immigrants, language skills and documentation status. Building human capital may be even more important for low-income immigrant parents than low-income native-born parents because they tend to have less education, as well as limited English proficiency⁴. More than half of the mothers identified their children's ECE programs as providing them with **employment and educational supports**. Beyond employment, ECE helped mothers

continue their education by providing child care so mothers could attend computer, business, English-language, and GED classes.

Mothers also mentioned relying on ECE programs for material supports including food and clothing to bolster their families' financial situations. Esmeralda, a Mexican mother of one, used her daughter's ECE program for material support:

“They [daughter’s ECE] give you a lot of help...they have helped me sometimes with food when I don’t have any. They give you canned food and sometimes bread, and my daughter they have helped with clothes and shoes.”

Mothers’ Use of ECE to Build Social Capital

Social capital refers to the benefits and resources that individuals, families, and groups receive through social relationships⁵. Research indicates that social capital can buffer the possible risks of low human capital among disadvantaged families^{5,6}. Moreover, immigrant families, social networks and ethnic niches can be a center for non-formal learning and skill development⁷. Thus, developing these networks may be particularly important for immigrants.

Parent–Parent Relationships

Mothers formed **reciprocal relationships** with other mothers that provided them with multiple kinds of support as well as links to other resources necessary for parenting preschool age children. Friendships among mothers in this study usually developed when parents were picking up or dropping off their children at the ECE, needed assistance from one another, or at other common activities outside of ECE like swimming or dancing lessons. In addition, some connections between mothers were initiated by teachers, particularly when mothers needed a certain type of support, such as transportation. It was only during these teacher initiated interactions that reciprocal relationships formed between mothers of similar racial and linguistic backgrounds.

These relationships provided mothers with:

- **logistical supports** like transportation and additional child. Mothers not only drove one another to and from ECE but they also babysit for each other when needed.
- **emotional support** included mothers getting together socially, calling one another on the phone for emotional support, as well as gathering information from each other either in person or on the telephone.
- **informational support** involved conversations regarding the ECE program itself which provided mothers with information on upcoming activities or things that were happening in the classroom.

Isabela, a Mexican mother of three, described her experiences with a couple of mothers from Time of Wonder:

“Some of them are parents of my daughter’s classmates—two actually. I talk all the time with one of them and on some weekends we go to the park with the girls. The other one I talk to sometimes like when they are on break we go to their house or the park.”

Some mothers strengthened **already-existing social relationships** with other parents in their children's ECE programs that existed prior to enrolling in ECE. They relied on these relationships for “insider” information regarding the logistics

of the ECE programs. This information included aspects of the programs that some parents were not as comfortable with or did not yet understand.

Sharon, a Ghanaian mother of three, explained how a friend who she knew prior to enrolling in River Banks, and whose children were already enrolled in the program, would answer any of her questions:

“Therefore if there is something I don’t understand or something I know she’s been through already, and I am about to go through it, I just ask her...yeah, these home visits that the Head Start was conducting, and I wasn’t sure what it was that was happening, so I talked to her, and she said, ‘oh, it’s nothing.’”

There were some parents who did not engage in social relationships with other parents beyond saying hello to other parents when they brought their children to and from the program. Their responsibilities as mothers, being employed full-time or more than full-time, and going to school infringed on their ability and time to socialize with other parents.

Parent-Teacher Relationships

Mothers utilized the teachers and staff at their children’s ECE programs for parenting education information support. Mothers took advantage of parenting classes provided by their ECE programs and actively looked to their children’s program and teachers for individualized parenting information. Mothers used daily, informal encounters, formal one-on-one parent teacher conferences, home visits, as well as parenting workshops to gather new information regarding improving their parent. This information included developmentally appropriate ways of interacting with children, nutrition, and behavioral issues. Mothers began to understand the importance of engaging their children in reading and writing activities, as well as improving their communication skills with their children in an effort to foster their children’s abilities to interact with other children at the ECE.

Isabel, a Mexican mother of three who often worked on her own English homework as her daughters completed their schoolwork, described the ways that her children’s ECE taught her to help her daughters with their learning:

“...They always tell me what I need to help them with at home, whether it be writing their names, or the colors, teaching them how to hold a pencil—just practicing more in general. On weekends, I tell them to cut things out or have them do other activities. Or, I’ll have them do their homework and I do mine.”

Mothers’ Use of ECE to Build Navigational Capital

Navigational capital, a less researched and understood form of capital, refers to the characteristics and abilities, including resilience as well as cultural strategies and the use of “individual agency within institutional constraints,” to maneuver various systems and institutions that may be “permeated by racism”.⁸

In this study, mothers’ navigational capital consisted of making connections with programs important to raising young children in the U.S., and also building important knowledge and skills for navigating U.S. child- and family-related systems and institutions.

In particular, mothers gathered information on the logistics of enrolling in kindergarten from their children's ECE programs. Some programs provided information on the process of selecting and enrolling children in charter schools. Secondly, ECE programs acted as social workers and resource brokers for mothers. Specifically, many mothers relied on their children's ECE programs for tasks such as assistance completing their applications for receiving support, accompanying mothers on agency visits, and speaking for the mother on the telephone with social workers. Moreover, mothers used their children's ECE programs to secure health experts and therapists that their children needed, including nutritionists as well as speech and physical therapists. ECE teachers and staff assisted parents by calling various social service agencies for and with mothers whose English was limited. ECE programs provided mothers with vital health and health care service information, such as gentle reminder about immunizations and annual doctor visits, and in some cases secured necessary health experts for mothers when needed.

Daniela, a Salvadorian mother of two, described how a program director at La Casita del Saber helped her with the process of finding a suitable school for her daughter:

"I did not know what to do to find a good school. The director that was working at La Casita del Saber at the time told me, 'Look, we have options for Dierdre. What do you want for her? Do you want her to attend a bilingual school or an only English school? Do you want it close to your house? What do you want?' I told her I wanted the best..."

Dynamic Interplay of Human, Social, and Navigational Capital Development

Mother's development of human, social, and navigational capital through interactions with their children's ECE programs were not processes that were mutually exclusive, but rather these aspects of capital development overlapped in certain areas.

Mothers used social connections they developed with other parents and staff to **bolster their education and employment opportunities**. Some mothers not only gained connections to adult education programs, but their relationships with other families in ECE sometimes led to new employment opportunities. Perla, a Mexican mother of two, described how another mother, Daniela, was able to watch her daughter while she was attending class:

"...sometimes parents work by maybe help with a ride, maybe watch my child for example. Now I am taking parenting classes here (at La Casita del Saber) Tuesdays and Thursdays, and one mom helped me last Tuesday and watched Rosa while she was at ballet."

Drawing on both social and navigational capital, mothers gathered information regarding **social welfare programs** and made connections with public assistance programs through relationships with ECE teachers and staff. Alejandra, a Salvadorian mother of two, explained how she gathered information on free dental and medical services for her children through the ECE program:

"They give us information related to if you don't have documentation they send bulletins saying, if you don't have medicine or money there are consultations there for free and everything. They give lots of information because sometimes they have meetings at these places and you have to go there [to receive free services]."

Finally, **language and communication skills** developed by low-income mothers in ECE programs reflected aspects of both human and navigational capital. These skills were important to navigate U.S. society. Guadalupe, a Salvadorian mother of one, highlighted the importance of the information she received from her child's ECE program:

"...more than anything you learn from [the ECE program] a lot because there are times when you are a mother for the first time and you don't know what you are supposed to do with them."

Implications for Practice, Policy, & Research

- **Ensure that high-quality ECE is available and accessible for all low-income immigrant families**
ECE, particularly for low-income immigrant families given their elevated risks, provides economic and educational support, but also serves a social function of supporting families in building various types of capital. Policymakers should ensure that all low-income immigrant families have access to high-quality ECE.
- **Offer support and information to immigrant families regarding navigating U.S. systems**
Providers can broker important resources, such as helping parents make connections with various social and health services, by providing immigrant families with important information regarding child and family services to support their development of navigational capital.
- **Support parents' human and social capital development**
Providers can connect mothers from varied racial-ethnic backgrounds with one another, link parents with English classes and provide clothes and food for families who are unable to purchase them.
- **Hire staff who specialize in working with families**
Providers should hire designated individuals who can help support families' development of various kinds of capital. They can create and maintain connections for these families.
- **Train early childhood educators and staff to work with diverse families**
Early childhood educators and staff should receive pre-service and in-service training related to working with diverse families. Training should not only focus on increasing cultural competency and reducing assumptions and biases about families from diverse backgrounds, but also help providers support immigrant parents' development of human, social and navigational capital. The focus should be on providing methods and tools to engage diverse families.
- **Tailor resources, information and connections to meet needs and characteristics of families**
Providers should ensure that all material is translated based on families' diverse needs and try to foster connections among parents in various ways.
- **Further qualitative and quantitative research needed**
Future research should explore how capital development unfolds in different care and early education settings. In addition, research should focus on how families from varied demographic backgrounds and structures use ECE to build social capital. Finally, research should employ various methods to study capital development among low-income immigrant families.

Data and Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 low-income first-generation immigrant mothers from Africa (n=19) and Latin America (n=21). Mothers had young children who were four to five years old and enrolled in one of three NAEYC accredited early childhood care and education programs in a large, metropolitan area.

Data were analyzed in three rounds of coding. During open coding, all the transcripts were read, focusing on codes developed a priori related to families' experiences with ECE. Other codes arose including employment support, education support, connections with other parents and families, as well as connections to other child- and family-related organizations and supports. During axial coding, each code was read separately across all 40 interviews. Finally, during the third wave of coding, the ways low-income immigrant mothers used ECE to build human, social and navigational capital, as well as the connections and overlap among these three types of capital emerged as an important aspect of ECE for these mothers.

	Total mother s (n=40)	African mothers (n=19)	Latina Mothers (n=21)
<i>Maternal age</i>			
Mean age (in years)	32.25	33.89	30.72
20-29	15	5	10
30-39	18	9	9
40-49	7	5	2
<i>Maternal education</i>			
less than high school	12	5	7
high school	15	8	7
some college	11	5	6
college	2	1	1
<i>Income</i>			
Income less than 100% of federal poverty threshold	40	19	21
<i>Maternal employment</i>			
Full time employment	24	7	17
Part time employment	7	4	3
Not employed	9	8	1
<i>Maternal time in U.S.</i>			
Avg. years	9.08	9.57	8.62
<i>Child characteristics</i>			
Focal child is 1 st child	21	11	10
Avg. number of children	2.22	2.42	2.05
<i>Couple relationship</i>			
Married/ Cohabiting	31	16	15
Single	9	3	6
<i>Type of Capital Developed in ECE</i>			
Human	30	14	16
Social	34	11	23
Navigational	11	1	10

-
- ¹ Magnuson, K., Lahaie, C., & Waldfogel, J. (2006). Preschool and school readiness of children of immigrants. *Social Science Quarterly*, 87(5), 1241- 1262.
- ² Fukkink, R. (2008). A contextual analysis of social function, stimulation, and child participation in educational facilities for young children in the Netherlands. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- ³ Vandebroek, M. (2006). Globalisation and privatization: The impact on childcare policy and practice. Working paper 38. The Hague: The Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- ⁴ Wight, V.R., Thampi, K., & Chau, M. (2011). Poor children by parents' nativity- What do we know? New York: National Center for Children in Poverty.
- ⁵ Coleman, J.S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120.
- ⁶ Kawachi, I. (2000). Social capital. *John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health*. Retrieved on August 29, 2009 from [http://www.macses.ucsf.edu/Research/Social %20Environment/notebook/ capital.html](http://www.macses.ucsf.edu/Research/Social%20Environment/notebook/capital.html).
- ⁷ Hagan, J., Lowe, N., & Quingla, C. (2011). Skills on the move: Rethinking and the relationship between human capital and immigrant economic mobility. *Work and Occupations*, 38, 149-178.
- ⁸ Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical face theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91. Quote from p. 80.