

Child Care Decision-making, Subsidy Use, and the Development of Economic Self-sufficiency among Immigrant Parents of Young Children

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Project Description.

Children of immigrants are the fastest growing segment of children in the U.S. with one quarter of children under age 18 having at least one foreign born parent (Hernandez, 2009). In addition, nearly 60% of children of immigrants were enrolled in some form of ECCE in the year before Kindergarten (Magnuson, Lahaie, & Waldfogel, 2006).

Still, we have limited understanding of immigrant families' experiences with the U.S. ECCE system. Consequently, the primary goal of this study was to provide insight into the experiences of low-income immigrant families as they navigated the early childhood care and education (ECCE) system. Specifically, African and Latino immigrants' child care decision-making experiences, their knowledge and use of child care subsidies, as well as families' strategies to achieve economic self-sufficiency were examined.

Research questions.

- How do low-income immigrant mothers of preschool age children learn to navigate the U.S. ECCE system? Specifically, how do immigrant mothers select ECCE for their children? What factors shape this decision-making process?
- How do low-income immigrant families utilize ECCE, child care subsidies and other governmental supports to promote their economic self-sufficiency and support their parenting?

Sample. The sample for this study consisted of 40 first-generation immigrant mothers living in the Washington, DC metro area. They all had children enrolled in one of the three NAEYC accredited ECCE programs, which were funded by Head Start or accepted child care subsidies. All of these mothers were low-income and lived below the federal poverty

threshold, qualifying them for both Head Start and CCDF.

Nineteen of these mothers hailed from various African countries (Ethiopia, $n = 8$; Ghana, $n = 5$; Sudan, $n = 2$; Egypt, $n = 1$; Morocco, $n = 1$, Somalia, $n = 1$) and 21 were from Latin American countries (El Salvador, $n = 10$; Mexico, $n = 7$; Guatemala, $n = 2$; Argentina, $n = 1$; Dominican Republic, $n = 1$; Ecuador, $n = 1$). These mothers migrated to the U.S. nine years (min. = 2; max. = 21) before they were interviewed for this study, on average. Mothers were 32.1 years old (min. = 21; max. = 46), and had two children (min. = 1; max. = 4), on average. For 21 mothers this was their first child.

Methods.

In-depth interviews. Forty in-depth interviews were conducted. The majority of interviews were conducted in mothers' homes; while seven interviews were conducted at the ECCE programs due to convenience for the mothers. All of the interviews were digitally audio-recorded, and last from one to three hours, with the average interview lasting about two hours. The interview protocol focused on the following areas: demographic background (age, number of children, marital status, household data, country of origin), immigration experiences, daily routines, ECCE history, parenting beliefs, parents' ideas and interactions related to education, health care, and financial stability, social support, ideas about the future, and advice to other immigrants.

Field observations. Field observations in the classrooms and ECCE-related meetings were conducted. In addition, parents were observed in their daily routines, surrounding their participation in

the in-depth interview. These field observations were documented with field notes, and were used to gain further insight into mothers' ECCE experiences.

Progress Update. The original project end date was September 2011; however a no-cost extension was granted to finish disseminating findings from the project. During this time manuscripts, research briefs, and conference presentations were prepared. The major findings from this project focus on: immigrant parents' experiences related to child care decision making, their experiences using ECCE to build various types of capital (human, social, and navigational), and these families' experiences building economic security*.

Implications for policy/practice

The findings from this study provide insight into how immigrant families navigate the ECCE system, such that policies and programs can be developed to support immigrant families' use of high-quality ECCE. In particular, these findings reveal the following: aspects of ECCE that immigrant parents believe are most important and desirable when selecting a program (language of the program and provider, level of diversity of the program, recommended by a trusted individual); what means parents use to find and select child care (social, organizational, and geographic connections); the obstacles immigrant families encountered in enrolling in ECCE (documentation, wait lists, eligibility questions); aspects of ECCE programs that mothers thought were most positive and those that were most negative; and, the ways families developed social capital through their interactions with ECCE programs.

Implications for research

Recruiting and collecting data from our sample was sometimes challenging due to linguistic and cultural differences. This study may be able to offer strategies for conducting research with immigrant families in terms of recruitment, data collection, and analyses. Specifically, there is limited information on conducting qualitative research with African families; thus any insights gathered from this project related to recruiting and collecting data from African immigrant families will provide important research contributions to the field.

***For more information:**

Vesely, C.K. (under review). Low-income African and Latin American immigrant mothers' selection of early childhood care and education (ECCE): Considering the complexity of cultural and structural influences. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

Vesely, C.K., Ewaida, M., & Kearney, K.B. (in press). Capitalizing on early childhood education: Low-income immigrant mothers' use of ECE to build human, social, and navigational capital. *Early Education & Development*.

Vesely, C.K., Ewaida, M., & Kearney, K.B. (2012). Capitalizing on early childhood education: Low-income immigrant mothers' use of ECE to build human, social, and navigational capital. Unpublished research brief on *Research Connections*.

Vesely, C.K., Ewaida, M., & Kearney, K.B. (2012). Low-income immigrant mothers' use of strategies and supports to development economic security in the U.S. Unpublished research brief on *Research Connections*.

Vesely, C.K. (2011). Early childhood care and education experiences of low-income immigrant families. Unpublished research brief on *Research Connections*.

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