Latino Families Value Early Education

Lower early care and education (ECE) utilization rates among Latino families have traditionally been explained by their cultural preferences for relative or informal care. However, this study found broad support from Latino families for formal ECE programs such as preschool. This research brief summarizes findings from this study, which involved in-depth interviews with over 100 Latina mothers of 4-year-old children living in Los Angeles County. These findings echo other recent studies and lend support to efforts that increase Latino families’ access to and enrollment in quality ECE programs.

Background

Although nearly 60 percent of children attending Los Angeles County public schools are Latino, they are 20 to 30 percent less likely than children among other ethnic and racial groups to attend formal early care and education (ECE) programs (i.e., childcare, early education and preschool activities). The difference in enrollment rates in such programs is troubling in light of research that has shown the importance of high quality ECE in preparing children academically and socially for school and the profound gaps in academic achievement between young Latino children and children from other ethnic and racial groups.

Lower ECE utilization rates among Latino families have traditionally been explained by the perceived cultural preference for relative or informal care. However, more recent studies have found broad support for early education within the Latino community. For example, a recent public opinion survey of 1,000 Latino households across 10 states commissioned by Pre[K] Now found that nearly all respondents (96 percent) believed it was important for children to attend preschool prior to kindergarten.

Access and availability of ECE may also influence Latino parents’ decisions. High-quality, center-based programs, for example, are relatively scarce in many predominately Latino neighborhoods.

Given the large and rapidly expanding Latino population in the county and California overall, it is important to look more closely at Latino families’ ECE preferences, practices and barriers (both real and perceived) encountered in accessing such programs. By examining these factors, ECE programs can become more responsive to Latino families in L.A. County.

The research described in this brief was conducted by the UCLA Center for Improving Child Care Quality (CICCQ). Funding was provided by First 5 LA and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. To read the full report for this study, please visit the CICCQ Web site at: www.gseis.ucla.edu/~ciccq.
Study Overview

UCLA researchers conducted in-home interviews in primarily Latino communities, including Downtown and South Los Angeles, with 116 low-income Latina mothers with 4-year-old children. Mothers were selected based on their national origin, and were drawn from a larger sample of parents participating in the Los Angeles: Exploring Children’s Early Learning Settings study (LA ExCELS).

Interviews were extensive, and averaged 90 minutes. Nearly three-quarters of families in the study used Spanish as their primary language at home and were interviewed in Spanish. Approximately 70 percent of mothers were immigrants, born in Mexico or Central America. The remaining 30 percent were U.S.-born Latinas, with parent(s) or grandparent(s) born in Mexico or Central America. These percentages roughly mirror the proportion of Latinos from Mexico and Central America living in Los Angeles County according to U.S. Census 2000 data.

![Figure 1: Percentage of mothers by language and immigration status](image)

Mothers were asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of and experiences in accessing early care and education, including preschool programs. At the time of the interview, roughly half of families in the study (51 percent) were using either public or private center-based care. In contrast, 43 percent of families reported not using center-based care, either caring for their own children (16 percent) or using friends and relatives (27 percent). Six percent of the families used licensed family childcare providers. These figures are similar to estimates of childcare utilization for all preschool-aged children in L.A. County.

Findings

Latina Mothers Believe Children Should Attend Preschool

Nearly all the mothers interviewed (93 percent) said they believe children should attend preschool before starting kindergarten. An overwhelming majority of these mothers (95 percent) said that the right age for children to begin formal education would be by the age of 4, if not younger. Mothers gave various reasons for why children should attend preschool, namely that children are better prepared academically and socially for later schooling.

![Figure 2: Child should attend preschool because...](image)

* Percentages add up to more than 100 percent, as mothers may have cited multiple reasons.
Some Mothers Encounter Challenges in Accessing ECE

Overall, mothers’ major concerns and challenges in accessing ECE mirrored those of other ethnic groups. Among mothers already using preschool, 27 percent reported encountering difficulties in the enrollment process such as waiting lists, enrollment requirements and documentation, and/or prohibitive program costs. Asked why they thought other parents might not enroll their children in preschool, over one third said they felt it was due to a lack of information about ECE programs.

Mothers were also asked how preschool enrollment could be made easier for Latino families. Specifically, they suggested clearer information about eligibility requirements (in particular, whether families would be asked about their immigration status), greater use of Spanish in the process, the elimination of waiting lists, and use of subsidies or vouchers to defray costs. Seventeen percent of mothers said that they would change their ECE arrangements if they could, generally citing pragmatic reasons for not doing so, including cost, location and schedule.

Latina Mothers Share Similar Ideas about Quality

Regardless of the challenges they face, Latina mothers know what they are looking for in terms of quality in ECE programs. These desires are very similar to those of families across ethnic, social and economic lines. Three-quarters of mothers in the present study, for example, expressed the belief that ECE quality varies from program to program. Providers’ experience and qualifications figured most prominently in mothers’ notions of ECE quality, along with teacher-to-child ratios and academic program content.

Birthplace and Language Status Affect Latina Mothers View of ECE

There was no association between mothers’ birthplace or home language and the current type of ECE that they were using. In describing an ideal setting for the care and education of their children, however, foreign-born, Spanish-speaking mothers were more likely to emphasize pragmatic factors related to accessing care, such as cost, location and schedule than foreign-born, English-speaking or U.S.-born mothers. They were also more likely to report negative experiences during the enrollment process. Yet a majority of these same mothers (62 percent) agreed with the statement that children should attend preschool before kindergarten. In other words, even though foreign-born, Spanish-speaking mothers may have reported greater difficulties in navigating the ECE system, they are some of the strongest proponents and likely consumers of preschool programs.

Latina Mothers Differ in Their Views of ECE According to Current ECE Use

Interestingly, mothers taking care of their children at home differed in their views of ECE from those using informal arrangements. Nearly all stay-at-home mothers believed that children should attend preschool and said that they would consider sending their own children to preschool. In contrast, mothers using informal care arrangements (i.e., friends and relatives) reported more reluctance to sending their children to preschool. The primary reason these mothers gave for their reluctance was that their children were too young.

English-speaking mothers born in the U.S. who used informal care expressed the greatest reluctance to sending their children to preschool. This is somewhat surprising, since one would expect these mothers to encounter fewer obstacles (i.e., language barriers or immigration status) to accessing formal ECE than non-English speaking, foreign-born mothers. Further analysis of interview data is necessary to tease out the distinctions between mothers’ beliefs about the importance of preschool and their actual choices of care settings and, in particular, the role of personal preferences and economic pressures in making ECE decisions.
Summary

Findings from this study indicate that most Latina mothers appreciate the importance of early education, particularly preschool, and are interested in enrolling their children in such programs. This differs from the commonly held notion that Latino families prefer in-home care by mothers or relatives for young children prior to formal schooling.

While mothers overwhelmingly agreed that children should attend ECE programs or preschool before starting kindergarten, many of their children did not attend these programs as a matter of fact. Further study is necessary to separate mothers’ preferences from barriers encountered in enrolling a child in ECE programs, including a lack of information, financial resources, scarcity of programs, immigration and language status. Nonetheless, study findings do indicate that barriers in accessing programs were particularly pronounced for immigrant mothers. In sum, this study provides additional support that Latino families value early education programs and that they would most likely benefit from policies designed to increase access and availability to quality ECE programs that are culturally and linguistically responsive to their needs.

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First 5 LA

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UCLA Center for Improving Child Care Quality

The UCLA Center for Improving Child Care Quality (CICCQ) is a grant- and contract-funded research center housed in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

For nearly 20 years, CICCQ has partnered with child care and preschool programs, policy institutes, and with academic institutions nationally to do research and evaluation to improve the lives of children. CICCQ takes a collaborative approach to the evaluation process, building relationships with community partners to inform research, practice and professional development. Using interdisciplinary methods for evaluation, CICCQ’s research staff brings substantial experience in the use of authentic child outcomes and classroom environmental quality measures in a variety of child care and early education settings. CICCQ personnel possess research and evaluation expertise and sensitivity to working in diverse communities throughout Los Angeles, CA and the United States. For more information, visit www.gseis.ucla.edu/~ciccq.

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