



Addressing the Needs of Latino Children

A National Survey
of State Administrators
of Early Childhood Programs

Executive Summary

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Summary of Study Findings

LATINOS are the fastest growing ethnic group in the US today. Nationally, Latino parents have participated at lower rates in early childhood education and early intervention services than parents from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. This study examined the linguistically and culturally relevant practices that state administrators reported were recommended or being used by early education and intervention programs that enrolled Latino children and families.

This study consisted of a national survey of 117 state administrators of early childhood programs (representing a 57% response rate) in 48 states and the District of Columbia to examine specific challenges, strategies, and beliefs around serving Latino children and families. State administrators were targeted as participants because of the need for information about how they were responding to the unique educational and linguistic needs of Latino children (birth to 5) and their families in early childhood services throughout the US. Four types of early childhood programs were represented: child care and Head Start, as well as Part B-Section 619 preschool programs and Part C infant-toddler programs for children with disabilities or at-risk conditions. The survey included seven subscales: enrollment of Latino children and families, challenges in serving Latino children and families, and strategies for serving Latino children and families, as well as administrators' beliefs about issues related to language development and early literacy learning, child assessment, approaches to support equity and diversity, and parental involvement.



Head Start administrators estimated a higher percentage of Latino children enrolled (28%) compared to estimates for the other three types of programs. The estimated percentage of Latino parents who primarily speak Spanish ranged from 16% for child care programs to 37% for Head Start. Overall, 79 administrators (68%) reported that the percentage of Latino children enrolled had increased over the past three years.

Additional findings revealed important similarities and differences among state administrators across key issues. All four groups of administrators reported the lack of Latino or bilingual professionals and the lack of sufficient staff preparation and training as the most urgent challenges in serving the Latino population. All four groups held similar views about strategies for working with Latino children and families, approaches to promoting diversity, and the importance of preserving a child's home language. The study found less agreement among groups on issues related to child assessment and parental involvement. Administrators were divided, for example, about whether it was advisable to assess young Latino children in their home language or to use both their home language and English. Head Start and Part C administrators reported higher ratings (indicating an area of strength) on three parental involvement strategies compared to administrators of the other two programs.

Taken together, these findings contribute new knowledge about practices that are emerging to serve Latino children and families in early education and intervention programs in the US. Ideally, these findings will serve as a springboard for future research and planning to address both the immediate needs and long-term goals related to serving Latino children and families in early childhood programs.

Introduction

IN THE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE NATION, early education and intervention professionals are increasingly encountering children and families from a variety of cultures. Latinos are now the largest minority group in the country and are growing at a faster rate than the population as a whole (US Census Bureau, 2003).

The growth of the Latino population is even faster among children under the age of 18, with this group representing the largest minority child population in the nation (Morse, 2003). Nationally, Latinos are less likely than children from any other racial or ethnic group to be enrolled in an early childhood program (US Department of Education, 2000) or to receive early intervention services. In 1995, the US Department of Education reported that, compared with 73% of White and 76% of African-American first graders, only 57% of Latino first-graders had participated in a center-based early childhood program prior to kindergarten. As a group, Latino children lag behind their peers when they enter kindergarten and the gap in academic achievement appears to widen as children grow older. Among 3- to 5-year-olds not yet enrolled in kindergarten, White and African-American children are more likely than Latinos to recognize most letters of the alphabet, participate in storybook activities, count up to at least 20, and write or draw rather than scribble (US Department of Education, 2000).

A child's pre-kindergarten classroom may be the first setting of sustained contact with a new culture and may help set the stage for early success or failure with formal schooling. Yet early childhood programs may be unprepared to address the diverse educational and linguistic needs of young Latino children and their families. The limited research on this topic suggests that early childhood professionals may lack knowledge of the cultural beliefs and values that Latino families from diverse backgrounds find important, and may lack understanding of the strengths and adaptations of a child-rearing system different from their own.

This study consisted of a national survey of state administrators of early childhood programs that enrolled pre-kindergarten children.



Method

SAMPLING PROCEDURE

We targeted state-level administrators of four types of early childhood programs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The four types of programs included child care, Head Start, Part B-Section 619 preschool programs for children with disabilities, and Part C infant-toddler programs for children with developmental delays or at-risk conditions. We distributed 204 surveys to state administrators, one for each of the four types of early childhood programs, across 50 states and the District of Columbia.

RESPONSE RATE

Our original sample included the entire population of 204 state administrators of four types of early childhood programs in every state and the District of Columbia. Of this total, 117 (57%) state agency administrators representing 48 states and the District of Columbia completed a survey. The response rates of administrators for individual programs were as follows: 25 (49%) for child care programs, 30 (59%) for Head Start, 26 (51%) for Part B-Section 619 programs, and 36 (71%) for Part C programs.

SURVEY DESIGN

The survey (available from the first author) was developed through a 3-stage validation process that included a review by 17 national experts. It was formatted as an 8-page booklet, printed in color, and consisted of a cover page, survey items, and a respondent information section. The survey consisted of 48 Likert scale items and 12 open or closed-ended items. The content of the survey was divided into the following seven domains: enrollment of Latino children and families; challenges in serving Latino children and families; strategies for serving Latino children and families; and beliefs about language development and early literacy activities, child assessment, and the promotion of diversity; and the extent to which programs employed various parent involvement strategies.

SURVEY PROCEDURES

We developed an interactive web site that contained information about the federally funded project and the national survey, a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey and inviting participation, and a version of the survey that could be viewed on-line or downloaded for later use. Participants were offered the option of completing the survey in writing, on-line, or through a telephone interview.

Findings and Recommendations

ENROLLMENT OF LATINO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Overall, 90 state administrators (77%) reported that their agency gathered information about the racial or ethnic background of the children and families enrolled. Head Start administrators estimated a higher mean percentage of Latino children enrolled (28%) compared to estimates for the other three types of programs (Table 1). The estimated mean percentage of Latino parents who primarily speak Spanish ranged from 16% for child care programs to 37% for Head Start. (Table 2). Overall, 79 administrators (68%) reported that the percentage of Latino children enrolled had increased over the past three years.

Table 1
Estimated Percentages of Latino Children Enrolled Across Programs

Program Type	Range	Mean	SD
Part B	0-34	10.90	10.58
Part C	1-50	11.73	11.05
Head Start	1-99	28.19	31.81
Child Care	0-73	12.99	17.55

Table 2
Estimated Percentages of Latino Parents Who Primarily Speak Spanish

Program Type	Range	Mean	SD
Part B	2-75	32.40	27.43
Part C	1-75	16.16	23.81
Head Start	0-100	36.92	39.95
Child Care	0-75	17.63	24.42

CHALLENGES

Across all types of programs, administrators reported the lack of Latino or bilingual staff and the lack of sufficient preparation and training of early childhood professionals as the most urgent challenges in serving the Latino population. Future directions that should be considered to create a more qualified workforce include increasing the diversity of early childhood professionals as well as revising professional development competencies and standards to include content related to serving culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Additional challenges given high ratings by all administrators included communication difficulties with Latino families and families’ lack of information about early childhood services. Consistent with earlier studies, these findings suggest that communication difficulties continue to serve as a significant barrier for Latino families in terms of their full access and utilization of early childhood services. Outreach activities to promote early childhood services must take into account a family’s home language and utilize a range of strategies to make this information widely accessible to Latino communities.

Major Challenges

- Lack of bilingual staff
- Lack of preparation and training among early childhood staff
- Communication difficulties with families
- Families’ lack of information

Frequently Used Strategies

- Translating written materials into Spanish
- Hiring professional interpreters
- Referring families to other community services

It is reassuring that administrators generally agreed on the importance of preserving a child's home language...

STRATEGIES

Not surprisingly, administrators who reported using more strategies also reported lower ratings on challenges. This suggests that programs that use a wide variety of strategies to reach and serve Latino families may have found ways to overcome the challenges they initially encountered in working with this population. Among the most frequently used strategies reported by all administrators were translating written materials into Spanish, hiring professional interpreters, and referring families to other community agencies. Conversely, the least frequently used strategies reported by all groups of administrators included conducting an assessment of needs and resources specific to the Latino community, and preparing Latino parents for leadership roles. Ideally, programs could plan the use of these different types of strategies systematically to allow a gradual move away from solving immediate problems to working toward goals that have a more lasting impact on the well-being of Latino children and families.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND LITERACY FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

It is reassuring that administrators generally agreed on the importance of preserving a child's home language—viewed by many experts as a critical aspect of language development for English language learners and important for ensuring that children do not become alienated from their families and community (NAEYC, 1996; Sánchez, 1999). With respect to second language acquisition, it was also encouraging that administrators generally agreed with the notion that learning two languages at the same time does not cause confusion or language delays in young children, and that teaching both languages actually facilitates English language learning. Once again, these findings are consistent with recommendations in the literature (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1997, Bialystok, 2001). With respect to literacy activities and reading instruction, administrators generally endorsed a balanced approach involving an emphasis on phonics as well as a whole language program.

CHILD ASSESSMENT

The study found less agreement among groups of administrators on issues related to child assessment. Administrators generally agreed that standardized tests (if used at all) should be translated into Spanish rather than administered through interpreters, although Figueroa and Hernandez (2002) have identified potential problems with both approaches. These authors propose that a more effective

approach would involve increasing the availability of culturally and linguistically competent assessors who also have expertise in the assessment of young children. Administrators were divided about whether it was advisable to assess young Latino children in their home language or to use both their home language and English. It should be noted that Ortiz and Yates (2002) endorse the second of these two approaches. McLaughlin, Blanchard, and Osanai (1995) offered the following additional guidelines for administering assessments to bilingual preschoolers: (1) consider the cultural aspects that affect how children learn and relate to others, (2) understand each child's linguistic background (e.g., level of proficiency in the home language and English), and (3) use a variety of procedures to gather information about a child's language including narrative reports, observations in natural settings, and language samples.

APPROACHES TO SUPPORT EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

All four groups of administrators held similar views and gave uniformly high ratings to each of the three approaches presented (see sidebar). In a comprehensive review of various curricular approaches to promote cultural diversity, Banks (1993) drew a clear distinction between the *additive* or “heroes and holidays” approach in which cultural content, concepts, or themes are added to a standard curriculum and the *transformation* approach in which the basic assumptions of the curriculum are transformed to enable children to view these issues from multiple cultural perspectives. Although sufficient empirical evidence is lacking, there is growing consensus in the field that early childhood programs must shift from relying solely on additive strategies toward implementing the transformation approach to help young children adopt positive attitudes toward individual and group differences. The third strategy that administrators uniformly endorsed involves providing additional educational opportunities to increase school readiness for children from diverse cultural groups who may be at risk for school failure.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

As a group, Head Start administrators reported the highest mean ratings and Part C administrators reported the second highest ratings (indicating an area of strength) on all three parental involvement strategies presented. These included providing opportunities for Latino parents to participate in making decisions about program policies, involving Latino parents in their children's education,

Administrators were divided about whether it was advisable to assess young Latino children in their home language or to use both their home language and English.

Equity & Diversity

- Provide additional educational opportunities for children from diverse groups
- Add content about people and events from different cultural groups to existing curriculum
- Transform the curriculum to infuse different cultural perspectives throughout the curriculum

Parent Involvement Strategies

- Participating in decision-making
- Volunteering in the classroom
- Participating in parent education and support activities

and encouraging participation of Latino parents in parent education and parent support activities. Although the link between parental involvement and children's early development and learning certainly is not a new concept in early education and intervention, it is encouraging to note that some programs are finding ways to extend these practices to include families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, despite significant communication barriers.

Conclusion

Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in the US today. Yet Latino parents participate at lower rates in early childhood and early intervention services than do parents from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, and professionals are increasingly encountering Latino children and families whom they are unprepared to serve. Taken together, the findings from this study contribute new knowledge about the specific linguistically and culturally appropriate practices that state administrators report are recommended or being used by early education and intervention programs serving Latino children and families. Ideally, these findings will serve as a springboard for future research and planning to address both the immediate needs and long-term goals related to serving Latino children and families in early childhood programs. ❖



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FPG Child Development Institute Mission

Every child deserves a safe, healthy, and stimulating childhood. Our work is dedicated to making this a reality for all children. FPG Child Development Institute studies the most important issues facing young children and their families and uses this information to enhance policy and improve practice. Our goal is to ensure that all children have a strong foundation for academic success and full participation as caring and responsible citizens in a multicultural world.



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