

Child Care as an Educational Resource: Advancing School Readiness for Latino Children and

Their Parents

Jennifer Torres

University of the Pacific

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Among the country's roughly 20.5 million preschool-age children, more than half have working parents, making child care an increasingly familiar fixture of the American early childhood experience (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). While an estimated 33 percent of children younger than 5 are cared for by relatives while their parents work, a growing proportion, 21 percent, are enrolled in child care and spend, on average, more than 30 hours per week at day care centers or family child care homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Child care, then, provides the context for what is likely a great deal of growth and development in children's earliest years.

As parents' dependence on nonrelative care has continued to expand, policymakers are contemplating child care, not just as a workforce issue — a means to help parents, in particular mothers, find and maintain employment — but as an educational issue as well. For example, nearly all states have implemented or are in the process of adopting quality rating and improvement systems for child care (QRIS National Learning Network, 2014). These tiered rating scales are designed to measure, communicate, and elevate the quality of care, in part, by emphasizing learning and developmental goals. Similarly, the federal Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, described as “a cornerstone of the Obama Administration's vision for early childhood learning,” has funneled \$800 million to 20 states that have committed to increasing the number of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers who have access to high-quality early care and learning programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

Research over the past several decades has suggested that such efforts are especially compelling with regard to low-income children and children of color, for whom high quality child care is often linked to improved elementary school achievement (Dearing, McCartney, &

Taylor, 2009; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004; Winsler, Tran, Hartman, Madigan, Manfra, & Bleiker, 2008). Of particular interest are the child care and early learning experiences of Latino children who represent a large and growing segment of the nation's population. According to U.S. Census (2011) estimates, Latinos account for roughly one quarter of all American children. By 2035, population forecasts predict that 1 in 3 children living in the United States will be Latino (National Council of La Raza [NCLR], 2011). Meanwhile, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) has projected continuing increases in labor force participation among Latinas, suggesting that a growing number of Latino children will spend time in child care settings. Currently, Latino children are more likely to live in poverty, more likely to lack health insurance, and less likely to graduate from high school than their White peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014; NCLR, 2011). Understanding whether and how high quality child care offsets the challenges of poverty, strengthens school readiness and bolsters academic achievement could yield new approaches for supporting the success of the country's 11.9 million Latino families, and for improving the social and economic wellbeing of the country as a whole.

While researchers have devoted considerable attention to the effects of child care on children's attachment to parents, children's behavior, and children's eventual performance in elementary school (Vandell, 2004), relatively less consideration has been given to the educational outcomes of child care for families and parents. Given the country's growing population of Latino preschoolers and the potential for high quality child care to improve school success for Latino students, connections among child care providers, parents, and educational systems warrant further study. By examining parent and caregiver expectations for education in child care, as well as the ways parents and child care providers support and contribute to early learning and development — both independently and as collaborators — this review aims to

identify potential opportunities to strengthen the caregiver-parent relationship and to build the capacity of child care providers to serve as educational resources for Latino families.

Expectations for Learning in the Child Care Setting

Both parents and providers look to child care, not just to meet the basic health and safety needs of young children, but to address children's social, emotional, and cognitive development as well (Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Piérrola, 1995; Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000; Sanders, 2007; Shlay, Tran, Weinraub, & Harmon, 2005). However, opinions on how best to approach teaching and learning in child care, as well as on what educational outcomes are appropriate in the child care setting often are at odds (Ceglowski, 2004; Piotrkowski et al., 2000). Understanding how and why the learning expectations of parents and providers diverge is critical to strengthening child care as an educational resource; effective collaboration and partnership seem to depend on a shared vision for the child's growth and development.

In alignment with guidelines established by child development specialists and organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, providers tend to emphasize play-based opportunities for learning and prioritize the development of children's social skills in child care (Holloway et al., 1995; Sanders et al., 2007). However, parents, mothers of color especially, emphasize academic goals for their young children (Holloway et al., 1995; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Sanders et al., 2007). They expect child care providers to plan structured activities that will help their children learn to count, recognize letter sounds and names, and build other academic skills perceived as necessary for adequate kindergarten preparedness (Ceglowski, 2004; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Sanders et al., 2007). Among Latino child care consumers, immigrants reported the strongest emphasis on academic goals (Pelletier & Brent, 2002), with mothers expressing the expectation, for example, that as

part of their child care experience, children should learn to communicate effectively in English before entering kindergarten (Piotrkowski et al., 2000).

Much research attributes dissonance in parent and provider learning expectations to cultural difference (Holloway et al., 1995; Sanders et al., 2007). The child-centered, play-based approach embodied in what professionals consider “developmentally appropriate practice” may be at odds with Latino cultural norms that emphasize communal responsibility and respect for authority (Sanders et al., 2007). Other scholars, though, warn that attributing incongruent beliefs entirely to culture — and essentially taking for granted that Latino parents have a poor understanding of child development — dismisses parents’ legitimate concern and agency in their children’s educational experiences (Durand, 2011). Piotrkowski et al. (2000), for example, considered whether Latina and other mothers of color emphasize academic skills in child care because they know their children are heading to under-resourced schools where a strong foundation in early literacy and numeracy skills might protect against academic failure: “Parents might develop a compensatory strategy that de-emphasizes interest and curiosity and, instead, emphasizes the acquisition of concrete skills to help children adjust quickly and successfully to classroom demands” (p. 554).

But educational concerns are not the only, nor perhaps even the most salient, factors influencing parents’ child care decisions. While parents express educational goals for their children in child care settings and they might view child care centers and homes as offering better educational opportunity than informal arrangements with family and friends (Uttall, 1999), parents across racial and ethnic lines prefer that relatives care for their young children (Liang, Fuller, & Singer, 2000). The preference is especially pronounced among Latino parents who are the least likely to enroll their children in child care centers (Crosnoe, 2007; Liang et al., 2000).

Here again, many scholars see kith-and-kin child care arrangements as an expression of cultural values, in particular that of *familismo*, which emphasizes family cohesion and reliance on relatives as sources of support (Durand, 2011; Buriel & Hurtado-Ortiz, 2000; Uttal, 1999). Understanding the many considerations that weigh on parents' child care choices is essential in exploring how child care might serve as a conduit of educational resources for Latinos. Parents value learning opportunities for their young children, but they desire culture relevance too.

Parents as Co-Teachers in Child Care

Rhetoric on early learning often emphasizes a parent's role as her child's first and most important teacher. According to Durand (2010), Latina mothers, guided by the concepts of *familismo* and *educación* (which encompasses education in both the academic and moral senses), tend to embrace this role and see themselves as central figures in their children's development. However, the potential for educational partnership that such dedication might represent is not always realized. Parents often are unsure how to participate meaningfully in child care settings, and providers do not always effectively facilitate parent involvement (Pelletier & Brent, 2002; McGrath, 2007). Leveraging child care as a bridge to educational systems and resources could hinge on forging more collaborative relationships between parents and caregivers.

As described by Durand (2011), Latina mothers hold themselves responsible for early learning, especially when it comes to establishing discipline, keeping children safe, and conveying cultural and moral wisdom and values. "Mothers spoke with less confidence, but no less commitment, regarding their role in facilitating children's academic learning at home" (Durand, 2011, p. 269). While mothers reported reading to their young children and organizing learning activities at home, they often expressed uncertainty as to whether such efforts promoted their child's learning (Durand, 2011; Uttal, 1999). Other mothers (McGrath, 2007) sought roles

in planning and developing educational activities for their children in child care, but providers tended to view parent involvement in less substantive terms. To them, engaged parents were fundraisers or field trip chaperones. Caregivers also questioned whether working parents had the time to meaningfully contribute to their children's education.

Meanwhile, in their study of the ways providers support families beyond caring for children, Bromer and Henly (2004) identified another potential obstacle to parent-provider collaboration. As movements to professionalize the child care field have gained momentum, close and emotionally involved relationships with families have been discouraged among providers as "unprofessional." Both parents and providers tend to see their respective relationships with the child as paramount in terms of early care and education (McGrath, 2007). Still, the cultivation of a strong relationship between parent and provider, while often neglected, could enhance the educational benefits of child care for Latino families. An important function of child care, then, might be to help Latino parents gain confidence in their roles as educational partners. To that end, Pelletier and Brent's (2002) study detailing the outcomes of a parent-involvement intervention for immigrant families offers a promising model. Through 14 "Parenting and Readiness" centers, teachers facilitated involvement by working with parents to set academic and social goals, and by inviting parents to work one-on-one with their child at the child care center. Parents who participated in the program reported more confidence in their own teaching abilities and more familiarity with schools in general.

Child Care as a Resource Hub

As framed by Piotrkowski et al. (2000) and Pelletier and Brent (2002), school readiness might be understood as comprising not just children's preparedness for kindergarten, but also parents' ability to navigate the educational system and to access the social, health, academic, and

economic resources their children might need to succeed at school. Some research suggests that child care centers help foster parents' school readiness, especially within low-income families and families of color. In neighborhoods with weak social networks, for example, child care providers might be the only accessible education authorities for parents of very young children (Small, 2006; Burchinal, Nelson, Carlson & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Similarly, for immigrant parents who are disconnected from their social networks, child care centers represent a potential, though not always affordable, source of support (Buriel & Hurtado-Ortiz, 2000).

Small (2006) has described child care centers as "resource brokers," connecting families to a wide range of third-party public and private agencies and services, through workshops, newsletters, bulletin boards, and other means. While many of the resources broadcast by child care centers focus predictably on children's health and development, other resources are expressly parent-oriented, for example referrals for domestic violence counseling, HIV testing (Small, 2006), or English as a Second Language instruction (Pelletier & Brent, 2002). The research suggests that parents of color largely trust child care providers as authorities on health, education, and development. Providers, in turn, have expressed an obligation to offer advice and assistance (Small, 2006; Sanders et al., 2007). For providers of color, this sense of duty seems especially compelling. Driven by the tradition of "other-mothering," caregivers of color are "a source of information for the parents regarding child rearing. ... Accompanying the theme of community mother is a strong sense of seeing their role and that of the center as a protector of the family and the educational future of the child" (Sanders et al., 2007, p. 400). However, Bromer and Henly (2004) have noted differences in the kinds of support and resources providers offer across types of child care settings. The greater flexibility of home-based programs often

affords more frequent opportunities to share resources and advice than in child care centers, which can be bureaucratic and constrained by corporate guidelines (Bromer & Henly, 2004).

Conclusions and Further Study

The literature on parents' expectations and experiences with regard to child care and learning supports the notion that child care could represent a promising opportunity to begin building strong and successful home-school partnerships among Latino families. Latino parents have high expectations for their children's learning in child care settings, and they see themselves as critical — if not always confident — partners in young children's education. Providers, meanwhile, already function as resource hubs and, in some cases, bridges to the K-12 educational system. Further study in several areas could lend new insight to efforts to strengthen the role of child care centers as educational resource brokers.

For example, further study is needed of family child care homes as a particular child care setting. Although most children are in home-based care environments, most research focuses on child care centers (Bromer & Henly, 2004). Home-based settings, with their more family-like atmosphere, could be important social resources for Latino parents and children, providing the culturally-informed practices parents value, while also enhancing coherence across the roles of parents and providers in supporting education.

Future research also should consider more closely the child care experiences of individual Latino subgroups. As noted by Crosnoe (2007), the needs and experiences of native-born Latinas differ in important ways from those of Latina immigrants. Most notably, foreign-born mothers are often removed from their social and familial networks. Whether participation in child care helps them activate new networks and access educational and other resources could bear heavily on family stability and children's ultimate success in school.

Finally, differences in parents' and providers' views on learning approaches and outcomes in child care deserve continued exploration. Future studies might examine how Latino parents form their opinions on what their children should learn in child care — are they influenced by media? By peers? By advocacy organizations? — and on how conflicting perspectives might be reconciled and common goals for a successful transition to elementary school established.

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