Learning begins at home during the child’s first years, and is complemented by what is learned in the formal educational setting when the child reaches school age (Weiss, Caspe, and Lopez 2006). Not all children enter school ready and prepared for success, however. Racial and ethnic minority students face challenges starting in early childhood education (Weiss, Bouffard, Bridglall, Gordon 2009). Ensuring that a child succeeds in school is a task that extends beyond the hands of educators and administrators; it is a responsibility shared by schools, parents, families, and communities, and politicians.

Parents must be and feel included and engaged in their child’s...
education to promote strong student success and close the widening achievement gap. Research demonstrates that parental involvement in schools improves student attitude towards school, predicts student success, empowers communities, and reduces dropout rates (Caspe, Lopez, Wolos 2006). Still many schools struggle with engaging the parent domain and vice versa.

This research draws attention to the important benefits of parental involvement in early childhood education, with special consideration for the US Latino population. To put matters concisely, not enough attention is being paid to early childhood education and its benefits in the United States, in particular for marginalized communities. In Northwest Indiana, linguistic and cultural diversity presents itself within the city’s minorities, with over 3,000 Latinos enrolled in South Bend schools. Additionally, parental involvement is important for a child's fruition, especially during pivotal developmental stages in education; today's parental involvement is much more than volunteering or fundraising. Still, minority parents oftentimes do not know how they can get involved in schools, nor do they fully understand the meaningful impact it has on their child's academic success.

Schools in the Midwest have become increasingly diverse, yet this diversity has been suppressed due to political, cultural and economic hegemonic forces that remain partial to the dominant group while positioning everyone else as inferior. Therefore, parents and students may have difficulties navigating everyday life in the community and in schools. The growing Latino, Spanish-speaking population will benefit from this study.

Our research is twofold: it recognizes and acknowledges the long-term benefits for Latino participants in early childhood education, while paying close attention to the ways parental involvement enhances the early childhood education experience. The researchers acknowledge the motivations, challenges, and benefits of increased parental involvement in early childhood education. When viewed in this way, parental involvement in a child's education can uplift and empower not just the child and family, but whole communities.

El Campito

El Campito is a bilingual preschool located in South Bend, Indiana, a mid-sized town with an increasing Spanish-speaking immigrant population. This school began in 1970 to provide safe child care for migrant farm workers, but has now transitioned into a Level 4 caliber preschool. El Campito understands the needs of the community by offering bilingual education to each student. The center offers three central programs -- a preschool, an after school program, and Parents as Teachers, a national program that works to enhance learning from home to school -- to best include all the members of the surrounding community.

Nowadays, El Campito attends to the needs of children from all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. El Campito is currently making an active effort to include parents in the school environment, and to better understand these needs, has conducted thorough interviews and surveys through a Family Needs Assessment (FNA).
Latinos in Northwest Indiana

Latino immigrants have been migrating to the Midwest for over a century primarily seeking a steady income and job stability. Since the early 1960s, South Bend has experienced a steady migration of Mexican immigrants. This is directly correlated with South Bend’s capacity for farm work and other industrial jobs. In the mid 1980s, immigration and settlement of Latinos in South Bend spiked due to Immigration and Control Act (IRCA), which gave citizenship to many undocumented residents. Now, families have created a life in South Bend. Over time, Latino workers have moved away from migrant farm work and begun working in more industrial and service oriented positions.

According to the American Community Survey, the Latino population continues to increase, stating that Latinos encompass 11% of South Bend’s total population. Though most Latinos in South Bend are of Mexican descent, it is still important to recognize and appreciate the diversity of the different backgrounds and ethnicities of Latinos in South Bend. Specifically, Latinos mostly reside on the west side of South Bend. Yet, these diverse areas are not typically wealthy areas nor home to a majority white population. Latinos are not the economically advantaged population of South Bend. Non-Latino earnings are over $10,000 greater than the average income of Latinos.

Importance of Early Childhood Education

Schooling is compulsory for all children in the United States. The ages at which they are required to attend school, however, are determined by each state. Generally, children between the ages of five and eighteen, give or take a year or two, must be enrolled in school (giving exception to some groups like the home-schooled and Amish populations) (Compulsory School Attendance Laws 2015). In most states, the minimum age limit to which free education must be offered by the state is five.

There has been a recent movement within the world of education reform to increase public funding for schools, but specifically for early childhood education. Why the push for early childhood education like preschool and kindergarten programs? Because educators and policymakers alike are realizing how important early childhood education can be in a child’s development.

Throughout the years, quite a few studies have been conducted that demonstrate the benefits of quality early childhood education. In their meta-analysis of 123 studies of early childhood interventions, researchers Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, and Barnett (2010) found the largest effects were toward improving cognitive skills in children. Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, and Dawson (2004) also discovered that prekindergarten enrollment boosted children’s academic skills, while Magnuson, Ruhm, and Waldfogel (2007) found that prekindergarten significantly raised math and reading performance at school entry. Children enrolled in a preschool program at the age of three or four obtain greater school readiness, grade retention, and academic achievement (Kaufman M., Kaufman S., and Nelson 2015). But preschool education has also been shown to positively impact children’s social skills and later school progress, such as increased high school completion (Camilli et al. 2010; Kaufman et al. 2015). Heckman, Pino, and Savelyev (2013) attribute these improved educational outcomes to an increase in academic motivation.

While educational benefits are to be largely expected from preschool enrollment, many studies have even found that early childhood education’s beneficial scope extends outside of academic gains. For instance, one longitudinal study looked
solely at the early childhood program known as the Perry program. This study found that enrollment significantly enhanced adult outcomes including employment, earnings, marriage, health and participation in healthy behaviors, and reduced participation in crime (Heckman et al. 2013). Those children who go through early childhood education are also less likely to experience delinquency, mental and physical illness, special education costs, and health care expenses, while being more likely to achieve greater family stability and homeownership (Kaufman et al. 2015).

In some ways, early childhood education also allows for at least an attempt at leveling the educational playing field. Achievement gaps exist between different races, SES levels, and English proficiency levels, and even prior to reaching school age, a gap opens between the achievement and school readiness skills of children from different family incomes (Tate 2012). In fact, on average, Tate (2012) reported that at entry, kindergarten students in the bottom 20% of SES levels show academic achievement that is 60% below the top quintile. This particular strain of social inequality is all the more ugly as it is present before a child has even entered the school system. But with specially designed interventions and quality preschool education, these gaps can be addressed early on, their detrimental effects mitigated. Such programs have substantial positive impacts on later student performance, and most especially for families from minority, immigrant, and low-SES backgrounds (Magnuson, Ruhm, and Waldfogel 2007).

Importance of Early Childhood Education for the Latino Population

By 2043, the US population will be majority people of color. Right now, one in five children under the age of 5 is of Latino descent (Cohn and Bahrampour 2006). According to the US Census Bureau, Latinos today make up 17% of the population and African Americans make up another 13% (2014). Because we know where the US is headed, especially with a growing Latino population, we have a unique opportunity to make the most of this knowledge and prepare tomorrow’s future. While the face of America changes, a perfect place to start investing is at the very bottom—in our nation’s tiniest students. For the US, investments in early childhood education and care are likely instrumental to successful integration. But the reach of high quality early learning programs to children of immigrants, especially Latinos, remains limited (Puente 2009). There are wide differences in access to early childhood education and care among minorities. Having the option for and access to quality preschool is what matters most for families. Parents and experts are convinced that early

Fast Facts on the US Latino Population

✦ Latinos are less likely than children from any other group to be enrolled in an early childhood program (U.S. Department of Education 2000).

✦ Latino students lag behind their peers when entering kindergarten, and that gap only widens as they get older (Buysse, Castro, West, and Skinner 2005).

✦ English language learners (ELLs) and immigrant students are the fastest growing subgroup in the US for the past 10 years and continue to increase in annual enrollment by 10% (Fry 2008).
childhood education plays a crucial role in narrowing the achievement gap for minority and low-income children, especially of Latino background.

All children deserve a quality early childhood education. As mentioned before, the gradual change in demographics for the US population have changed classroom dynamics. With an increase in the Latino population and data proving their growing achievement gap in schooling, Latino children in the US must have greater access to early education to reduce the significant achievement gap between them and white counterparts.

Latino families almost universally support preschool and believe that access to preschool provides an advantage to children when they start kindergarten (Garcia, E.E. and Gonzales, D.M. 2006). However, they are often overlooked in policy making at large and specifically in education, which is seen in low enrollment of Latinos. These statistics demonstrate the ways in which Latinos are disenfranchised when it comes to access to early childhood education.

Some of the most important learning actually takes place in the years before elementary school. Therefore stressing the importance of quality early childhood education as preparation for not only kindergarten, but for life. As a matter of fact, “every dollar spent on pre-k returns an average of $7 in later cost-savings and benefits from reduced grade repetition, fewer special education referrals, greater productivity, and lower crime rates” (Barnett 2013). Since Latino children are amongst the poorest children in the country, many children do not gain access to quality preschool due to its expense. Students without a preschool education pay for the price later in life. If provided with access to the quality preschool, then one could eliminate the resources, time, and money spent on young adults trying to catch up rather than meeting one’s own full potential.

As kindergarten ramps up its academic standards, especially due to pressures from standardized testing and Common Core, students need to be adequately prepared to read and write sentences. Preschool now is not just playing with toys and singing songs. It is much more than that. This exact group of students will one day become America’s workforce. If Latinos will comprise of the majority of the US workforce in 2050, then it only makes for the US to focus on the accessibility of preschool.

An explicit example comes from the Universal Pre-K in Oklahoma with data collected in the early 2000s by the Center for Research on Children in the US, which indicated that Latinos benefited the most from quality preschool. While all the students showed improvement in word and letter recognition, math problems, and spelling, the progress among Latinos was the highest. Latino youngsters, in this study, benefited in both language and cognitive areas (Gormley et al. 2005). In this diverse setting with students from all different ethnicities and races, the children of Latino heritage benefited the most from the universal preschool program.
Latino Community’s Engagement with Early Childhood Education

As mentioned earlier, Latinos are the ethnicity with the least participation in preprimary programs—that is to say, nursery school, preschool, or kindergarten programs. The 2013 US Census found that Latinos come in last with 57% enrollment, behind their white, black, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and biracial counterparts (Preprimary Enrollment). The poverty rate for Latino children is 34%, which is significantly higher than for white children (14%) and the poverty rate for all races (23%). A larger share of black children live in poverty (40%), however, meaning that poverty is not the only factor contributing to low Latino enrollment in preprimary programs (Access to Preschool 2013).

In fact, there are many possible reasons that Latino families do not use child care services as much as other populations. The ones that have been backed by studies are limited knowledge about availability/benefits, limited accessibility, cultural differences in child rearing, lack of familiarity with service systems in general, and language/transportation barriers (Buyssse, Castro, West, & Skinner 2005). Additionally, for those working families who cannot access the limited supply of public preschool, the cost of preschool acts as a major deterrent (Access to Preschool 2013). Children of all races in families with mixed immigration status, where one or more members are undocumented, are consistently enrolled in pre-

Bilingualism in the Classroom

All classrooms at El Campito are bilingual.

- Ideally, students are placed in classrooms with a mixture of native English-speakers and other ELLs
- Instruction takes the form of a rough 50:50 model from the beginning
- Attempts made to equally divide instruction time between English and Spanish
- This is accomplished in a variety of ways (alternating days, alternating subjects, etc.)
- Interactions between native Spanish- and native English-speakers are encouraged throughout the class

Bilingualism Myth Busters

1. **Bilingualism causes language acquisition delay.**

   While a bilingual child's vocabulary in each language may be smaller than average, the child's total vocabulary will be at least the same size as a monolingual child. When bilingual children produce short sentences, they develop grammar along the same patterns and timelines as children learning one language. Bilingualism itself does not cause language delay.

2. **The language spoken at home can have a negative effect on the acquisition of the school language.**

   In actuality, the linguistic foundation at home can act as a strong base for learning a new language. It can give children a known means to communicate with, parents or caretakers, in another language while acquiring another.

3. **Children who are bilingual mix up their languages.**

   When children use both languages within the same context, it is known as “code switching.” Researchers view code switching as a sign of bilingual proficiency. Additionally, it is often used to express emotion or to highlight what someone feels or said in another language. Code switching is a natural part of bilingualism, and it should be expected that bilingual children will code-mix when speaking with other bilinguals (Lowry 2011).
school at lower rates than their peers; the ever-present fear of undocumented immigration status becoming known to government agencies often deters families from placing their children in preschool (Hernandez 2013).

Buysse et al. (2005) conducted a study that consisted of a national survey distributed to 117 state administrations of early childhood programs. The survey examined the specific challenges, strategies, and beliefs around serving Latino children and families. They found that the biggest challenges in serving Latino families were the lack of Latino/bilingual staff, professionals’ lack of sufficient training, preparation, and experience in serving Latino children/families. In the same study, administrators reported that the most frequently used strategies in serving Latino families were translating written materials to Spanish, using professional interpreters, and referring families to other community agencies/resources. Lastly, the least frequently used strategies were preparing Latino parents for leadership roles, and conducting needs and resource assessments specific to the Latino community. Fortunately for South Bend’s west side, this is exactly what El Campito is striving to do with their Family Needs Assessment! El Campito is actively seeking out parents’ advice and feedback, as well as listening to their needs as individuals and a community in the hopes that they may better serve the children and families enrolled there.

Parental Involvement Amongst Latinos

**Why Latino parents may not be as engaged, and how that can change**

In general, schools understand the huge effects that parental involvement can have on a child’s education, and studies have shown that schools are trying to incorporate more voices of diverse groups to find out how these parents are supporting their children’s education and development (De Gaetano 2007, Mapp 2008). Unfortunately, factors that influence parental engagement among ethnic minority and/or immigrant families have been less understood (Durand 2011). In addition, because of Latino parents’ seeming disinterest in normalized, and accepted forms of parental involvement, they are often viewed with a deficit perspective (Crozier 2001). In other words, what constitutes “good” parenting and involvement in one’s child’s education is what white, middle class citizens have decided work for them.

However, scholars and schools work against these deficit perspectives. De Gaetano and El Campito alike choose to view Latino parents through an asset-based lens, seeing them “as learners, as teachers, and as transmitters of culture” (De Gaetano 2007, 155). For instance, the high value placed on education and schooling for their children has been well documented among both first- and second-generation Latino families (López 2001; Peña 2000; Durand 2011). To engage in what are widely accepted to be “typical” school involvement practices, such as volunteering in a child’s classroom...
or assisting children with schoolwork at home, parents must not only know how to engage in these habits, but also be given opportunities to engage in them, and to know that it is expected of them to do so. Contrary to this representation, Latino parents do care about and believe in the significance of education. Latino parents are involved in their children’s academics, but their involvement typically goes unrecognized in schools due to its atypical nature (Campos 2008).

When speaking about immigrant families, as many Latino ones are, parents’ levels of acculturation - or their assimilation into the dominant culture - can also have a significant effect on their child-rearing and education-related beliefs and practices (Durand 2011). In this sense, many immigrant, low-SES, and/or ethnic minority families may believe that it is the role of the school and/or teacher to initiate parental involvement. In addition, due to little or no education being experienced by the parent in the new country, Latino parents may see themselves as less efficacious and able to aid their children in their academic endeavors. Furthermore, and related to acculturation, Durand (2011) found in her study that the strongest factor associated with parents’ involvement in school was their social capital, defined as the number of parents from their child’s classroom with whom they spoke regularly, and knew well enough to talk to. In their FNA, El Campito asked parents if they felt connected to the staff and other families at El Campito.

**Cultural Capital**

People have cultural tools—language, traditions, non-verbal cues, and values—that allow them to operate in their society successfully. If someone has tools that are deemed not useful in a community, that person will lose cultural capital. For example, if a mother speaks Spanish only to find out that people in her community are insulted by her not speaking English, then she will begin to feel ashamed of her heritage.

When administrators at a school organize their environment in a way that supports the linguistic and cultural capital of parents and students, then the school is rejecting the negative attitudes and ignorance about diversity that exists in the broader scope of society. The school holds up to bilingual families an affirming image of who they are within society. At El Campito in particular, the educators build on rather than undermine the foundation of families’ cultural and linguistic home experiences as the foundation of their future learning.

Ways to promote and support Latino parents’ cultural capital: Validate the use of Spanish; Advocate for Spanish speakers; Honor the Spanish speaker’s background and incorporate multiple perspectives; and Hold events that celebrate the Latino culture (Cummins 2001).

“We just always talk about how school is important, and how we’re always learning.”

— El Campito parent
Overwhelmingly, parents reported feeling very connected to and supported by the staff, but nearly all admitted that they have little connection to parents whose children also attended El Campito. Consequently, when looking to engage more parents in their children’s education, El Campito should focus their efforts and programming on improving inter-parent relationships and therefore, social capital.

“Non-Traditional” Ways of Latino Parental Engagement

+ Families motivating and encouraging children via narratives of hardship and hard work that the family has experienced. For example, immigrant parents exposing their child to work in the fields teaches not just school scripted lessons but real-life ones. When becoming acquainted with this unjust work, a child understands the unreasonable compensation and couples value with schooling (Lopez 2001).
+ Motivating their children to do well in school.
+ Providing emotional support for academic efforts.
+ Placing high value on education and schooling.

Word Gap

By school entry, the gap between the wealthiest children and the poorest children is noticeable. Child psychologists Hart and Risley found that children from low-income families have heard 30 million fewer words than a child from a more affluent family. The absence of preschool expands this “word gap” and catching up later in life becomes increasingly difficult (Hart, Betty, Risley, Todd R. 2003). If kindergarten is the new first grade, then how does a 5-year-old coming straight from home to school ever keep up?

Suggestions for Increasing Parental Involvement Amongst Latinos

• Changing the approaches to promoting diversity, equity, and access: (all from Buysse et al. 2005)

• Providing additional educational opportunities for children from diverse groups

• Adding materials with cultural content to existing curriculum

• Transforming curriculum by incorporating cultural events/themes throughout learning activities

• Providing opportunities for parents to grow in relationship with other parents at the school to increase social capital and engagement amongst parents

• Increasing accountability for the implementation of parent engagement
• Increasing professional development for school staff and parents
• Increasing funding for parent engagement activities
• Supporting the expansion of neighborhood schools

Additionally, in a time where educators and policymakers are especially concerned with educational reform, early childhood education must enter the conversation.

References


elementary-school-children-education


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