Early learning experiences and outcomes for children of U.S. immigrant families: Introduction to the special issue

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Contents

1. Setting the stage: demographic trends in the United States and their implications for early childhood .............................................. 363
2. What do we learn about child development? .......................................................................................................................... 364
3. What do we learn about early childhood education policies and programs? .......................................................... 365
4. Limitations ........................................................................................................................................................................ 365
5. New directions .................................................................................................................................................................... 366
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................................................................... 366
References ........................................................................................................................................................................ 366

This issue of \textit{Early Childhood Research Quarterly} includes nine articles that broaden our understanding of child development and early education practices and policies by exploring the early learning experiences of children of U.S. immigrant families. These papers address many of the pressing challenges and opportunities that we face, as our nation and its institutions grow increasingly diverse. Several of these challenges were outlined in ECRQ’s call for papers: “As the U.S. receives increasing numbers of immigrant families from non-European countries, schools are challenged to understand the diversity of these children’s home experiences, approaches to learning, and interaction and communicative styles. Immigrant parents also often have less knowledge of and agreement with the cognitive, social, emotional, and academic demands of U.S. classrooms... To facilitate children’s successful school transition, teachers in receiving schools and minority parents need more explicit understanding of each other, since assumed knowledge of the other, which comes from growing up in the same culture is not available to undergird their interactions.” In addressing these challenges, the included articles make remarkable use of a wide range of research methodologies from quantitative analyses of large nationally representative datasets to fine-grained quantitative and qualitative analyses of smaller datasets.

Because ECRQ is focused on the development of children birth through 8 years of age, we use the term “children of immigrants” rather than “immigrant children.” This is more than a semantic distinction, for the overwhelming majority of these children were born as U.S. citizens (more than 90%), most of the others will become citizens, and nearly all will grow up as Americans (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). We can say with certainty that the integration of these children into our educational system during their earliest years will have profound effects on their societal contributions and productivity as adults.

1. Setting the stage: demographic trends in the United States and their implications for early childhood

Historically, schools have played a key role in fostering acculturation and language acquisition among the children of immigrant parents (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2007). Given this historical context, what has changed,
recently? First, analysis of demographic trends in preschool enrollment suggests that there has been rapid growth in the proportion of children moving from the private sphere of the home into the public sphere of “school” (defined broadly) at earlier ages than in previous decades (Takanishi, 2004). Second, schools and preschools have experienced rapid shifts in the rate and in the “face” of immigration—children of immigrant families make up the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population and an increasing share of immigrants arriving from Latin American and Asian countries (Hernandez, 2004). Given that over 60% of 4-year-olds are in center-based care and educational settings outside the home, many children of immigrants must navigate these multiple linguistically and culturally linked contexts as early as preschool (Magnuson, LaHaie, & Waldfoegl, 2006). In many ways, the emerging research questions that arise from these two demographic shifts are the ones that front-line practitioners in early education and care have been facing for over a decade. This issue provides us with a chance to step back and take stock of ways that these two transformations expand early childhood research and policies.

With this set of pressing demographic transformations, our field has two key opportunities. First, it gives us the opportunity to consider ways that focusing on immigration expands our models of human development in social contexts. Some findings presented in this issue show that the varied mental health and academic outcomes for children are likely a result of differences in economic, family, and social resources (or the “social address” characteristics) that may covary with immigration but are not part of immigration experiences, per se (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). Findings in several other papers illustrate that immigration and the resulting condition of being a cultural minority are associated with “nonmainstream” developmental experiences but developmentally successful outcomes, nonetheless. Second, these demographic transformations provide us with opportunities to expand our understanding of ways that policies may meet the needs of children of immigrant families in some ways and miss the mark in serving their needs, in others. These two opportunities are briefly outlined below.

2. What do we learn about child development?

As is clear from the papers in this issue, it is time for our field to expand “basic process” models to include migration and mobility in addition to race and ethnicity as key sociocultural contexts within which children develop. For example, multiple papers in this issue highlight the primacy of language as “front and center” to any discussion of the experiences of children of immigrants.

A number of this issue’s papers also expand and redefine parenting that is supportive of children’s development. These papers provide insights on ways that immigrant minority groups foster children’s successes, though these groups may be less likely to use particular mainstream parenting practices. For example, Huntsinger and Jose (in this issue) help to reshape our field’s definitions of “parent involvement.” They compare high-educated immigrant Chinese parents and European American parents of young children and uncover ways that immigrant Chinese parents put in extra work at home to support their child’s learning. Chinese immigrant parents reported their valuation of “working ahead” in textbooks and workbooks through formal instruction in the home while European American parents reported investing effort in building rapport with teachers and gaining information about their child’s relative ranking compared to other children in the classroom. This and several other papers help to reshape and redefine what it means for parents to invest in children’s educational opportunities.

Second, several of these studies make significant contributions to developmental models of children’s life course trajectories and of “timing” of key events in families’ lives. Past research on family formation and family structure has highlighted the importance of the timing of poverty spells, fertility decisions, marriage, and maternal employment (Kalil & Dunifon, 2007; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Several of the papers in this issue highlight new perspectives on timing to consider the timing of migration and mobility within the life course trajectories of families. For example, in their analyses, Glick, Bates, and Yabiku (in this issue) highlight the role of timing of immigration in parents’ developmental histories as a key contribution to young children’s school readiness. This paper and several others in this issue highlight and extend our focus from the timing of migration within the multigenerational life course of the family.

Third, we also gain new insights into the risks and protective factors faced by children of immigrant families. For example, empirical evidence is equivocal with regard to the whether recency of immigration and families’ levels of acculturation (i.e., familiarity with an adopted culture) are either risky or serve as strengths, offering protection in certain contexts (Farkas, 1996; Villaruel et al., 2009). As pointed out by DeFeyter and Winsler (in this issue), recency of immigration can confer advantage. As examples, DeFeyter and Winsler find that, regardless of where they immigrated from, first and second generation children of immigrants demonstrated greater socioemotional skills than did their native-born and ethnically matched counterparts. DeFeyter and Winsler highlight that selection and the process of acclimating to a new nation cannot be disentangled, with parents’ choice to immigrate itself likely to represent “a bold act of protective parenting.”

Other papers show the importance of disentangling poverty-related risks and immigration. Rates of exposure to persistent poverty at the family and neighborhood levels are high for children of color generally, and for children of immigrants, specifically (see Hernandez, Takanishi, and Marotz, in this issue). Importantly, while models of poverty and children’s behavioral adjustment have been expanded to incorporate measures of cultural and social contexts, including children’s ethnic identity, their neighborhoods, and their schools, this body of research has only recently intersected with a newer research tradition focusing on families’ experiences of immigration and acculturation (Boyce & Fuligni, 2007; Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2007). For example, in analyses by Keels (in this issue) cognitive test score differences that at first appear to be substantial between groups of young children that differ by immigration status are
substantially attenuated when including a range of socioeconomically related child and family level controls. This paper, along with others, highlights the need to assess the role of selection into immigrant status, where we can begin to take into account the role of parents’ human capital in predicting children’s successful educational outcomes and families’ well-being. The researchers included in this issue have expanded our “toolkit” for capturing the heterogeneity of these poverty-related and immigration-related indicators, including the family’s immigration status, language preferences, citizenship status, and life course timing of immigration to the U.S.

3. What do we learn about early childhood education policies and programs?

A major contribution of several papers in this issue is to highlight the ways that the “face” or pattern of families’ enrollment in many early childhood programs varies substantially by families’ immigration status and country of origin. Turney and Kao’s paper (in this issue) highlights, for example, that recently immigrated families are less likely than their native-born counterparts to use out of home child care and formal educational programs such as Head Start. Among recent immigrants, Latino immigrants are substantially less likely to use out of home care than are Asian, African, or European immigrants. The paper by Sirin, Ryce, and Mir (in this issue) serves as an important reminder that families may prefer to place their children in private educational settings that they perceive to be more closely aligned in terms of culture and religious faith than in public school settings, as another example.

Immigration status also plays a critical moderating role when we examine the benefits of large-scale programs like Head Start. Two papers, in this issue build on Magnuson et al.’s (2006) pivotal recognition that the benefits of preschool education may be especially large for English language learners, as compared to their English proficient and native-born counterparts. It is important to highlight that we have just “scratched the surface” of our understanding of immigration status as a moderator of program impact. The papers in this issue highlight that a “general process” model may not fit applied classroom-based intervention efforts in educational settings in same way that they do not fit developmental models of family socialization.

We also learn that children of immigrants, many of whom are English language learners and whose parents may have less access to or accumulation of educational attainment, may be at a double disadvantage: This group of children is more likely to start school “behind” and also face significant challenges as they enter formal schooling. For example, Han and Bridgall (in this issue) show the ways in which language minority children are disproportionately located in higher poverty, ethnic minority schools that often have lower levels of learning resources. Their comparisons of language minority children attending schools with high or low concentrations of language minority children exemplify how access to resources is associated with children’s learning outcomes. These researchers highlight areas where we must clearly target greater investment if we are committed to supporting the school achievement of children of immigrants.

Along these lines, Sirin et al. (in this issue) alert us to the reality that teachers’ expectations and practices may be significantly informed by their view of immigrant parents as having discrepant versus congruent values. Relationships between teachers’ views, parents’ values, and children’s performance are likely to be complex. Sirin et al. find that teachers in Islamic schools and in public schools both generally viewed parents as having similar values when children were highly performing, academically. It was only for lower performing children that teachers in public schools (but not Islamic schools) viewed that parent values were discrepant from their own.

Finally, the papers included in this issue give us some new perspectives on ways to think through program evaluation and technical support for program quality. For example, there are few measures of whether classroom compositional characteristics such as the proportion of children who are English language learners are associated with teachers’ effectiveness or with children’s gains in literacy and English proficiency. Mindful of the importance of model equivalence in developmental and prevention sciences, careful attention needs to be paid to whether programs are effective with subgroups of children who may differ by recency of immigration and language minority status, as well as for the group as a whole (Harachi, Choi, Abbott, Catalano, & Bliesner, 2006). Attention should also be paid to whether programs aim to be culturally competent across diverse ethnic, cultural, or linguistic groups, or culturally specific to the needs of one or more socioculturally distinct populations of young children (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004). Greater understanding of the growing linguistic and cultural diversity among our nation’s youngest children will allow researchers and policy professionals to make more informed decisions about how to best evaluate or monitor the effectiveness of schools and social programs designed to serve them.

4. Limitations

The extent to which communities and school districts have large concentrations of immigrant families from one region of the world or have large numbers of immigrant families originating from wide ranging regions, cultures, and languages varies from state to state and often by the specific city within a state. This dynamic nature of immigration sets a “high bar” for the external validity and generalizability of our research. In order to be policy-relevant, our field is challenged to provide findings that are both culturally specific and generalizable to a wide range of families from differing nations of origin.

Due to the demands associated with collecting the sample sizes needed for rigorous research, the studies included in this issue often focused on data collected in large metropolitan areas, from members of one or two immigrant groups, and from participants of one type of early childhood program. Before we can make generalizations about the needs of the children of immigrants, the basic findings discussed in these papers must be replicated in a range of community contexts, with different immigrant groups, experiencing a range of service delivery options.
5. New directions

Common to many of the papers in this issue is the recognition that early childhood settings may be the first structured educational institutional setting that many recently arrived families encounter. As such, teaching staff in these settings often has a strong grasp on the ways that the needs of children of immigrants are both similar and different from their native-born counterparts. Importantly, practitioners and researchers have begun to explore ways that cultural and linguistic diversity among program-enrolled families poses both significant challenges and significant opportunities for innovation in the classroom. Administrators, teachers, and other service providers, such as mental health consultants that work with recently immigrated families, recognize that they must not only be sensitive to linguistic differences, but must also be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences (Gonzales, Knight, Birman, & Sierraoli, 2003; Schmitz & Velez, 2003). The Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, and Garcia article (in this issue) alerts us to the benefits of explicitly considering the competencies and needs of individuals with different cultural backgrounds.

An increasingly diverse classroom enrollment provides teachers with creative opportunities for innovation in their work with parents and with students. Using the framework of individualism and collectivism, for example, Rothstein-Fisch et al. (in this issue) offer the field a new set of materials for professional development that lets teachers see how their culture (taken for granted beliefs and values) infuse their styles of instruction, and how this inadvertently disadvantages students from families that do not share that cultural orientation. Greater attention to the strengths of immigrant cultures offers teachers new opportunities for innovation and for making deeper connections to the values of parents and their goals for their own children. This and other papers are helpful in allowing our field to see differences across parents’ and teachers’ methods and goals as sources of strength and inspiration when looking for new ways to help newcomers connect with school settings.

This issue’s concluding article, by Hernandez et al. orients us to the future of these dynamic demographic trends and places this emerging body of work in larger policy contexts with discussion of the early educational settings, social safety net, health care, and immigration laws, which represent a complex set of services and bureaucracies that newcomer families must navigate. The final paper provides us with thoughtful description and discussion of immigrant children’s families, the strengths and vulnerabilities of these families, the socioeconomic context of their lives in the U.S., and most importantly disaggregates these characteristics based on the regions and countries from which newcomer families emigrate. With regard to policy, the final paper makes clear that these families and their children are an important part of the present and future economic and societal success of the U.S. As such, Hernandez et al. provide us with key insights into the many policy options that can support the early development of children of immigrant families.

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References


