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Connection & Community: Elevating The Impact of Latina Early Educators

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Introduction

Ask a family what they seek while they search for child care and early learning options, and their answers are bound to vary widely. It could be largely dependent on their work schedules, the availability in their communities, or the specific environment they hope for. In the case of many families of color, these answers may include some mention of preferences for cultural and linguistic options that mirror their home environment. For Latinx¹ parents, 91% state that multilingual and multicultural early childhood education is a top quality they look for in selecting care for their children.² Latinxs are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States³ with one in four babies born in the United States coming from Latinx families.⁴ These young children make up the most diverse generation in the United States,⁵ and with that vibrant cultural and linguistic diversity, the preferences of their families for their early childhood education (ECE) experiences are distinct.

Data suggest that Latinx families often lack access to the child care options they want for their families and the help they need affording child care. Although many Latinx children would qualify for child care assistance, given that a large proportion are in families with low incomes, Latinx families with low incomes are less likely than other low-income families to receive child care subsidies.⁶ This likely results from language and other barriers that make it difficult for Latinx families to obtain child care assistance or to even find child care options that meet their needs.

Understanding Latinx communities, and the preferences of Latinx families for their children in early care and education, is essential for ensuring our ECE system is equitably serving families and meeting their definition of a quality experience. Latinxs currently make up 18 percent of the United States population and, as such, are the second largest ethnic group in the country.⁷ This group, while often painted as a monolith, carries a wide range of diversity, including countries of origin, immigrant status, language preferences, cultural traditions, and more. As Latinx children continue to enter child care and early learning opportunities, the field must be prepared to meet the needs of their families, such as supporting the development of their home language alongside English - a high-priority issue given that one in three children from birth to age five are dual language learners (DLLs) or are learning English alongside their home language.⁸

A critical component of meeting the early education needs of Latinx families are the educators who make up the early childhood education workforce. Latina early educators reflect the mosaic of diversity that Latinx communities bring to the United States and carry a wide array of life experiences, skills, and assets to the field of early childhood education. Their presence and leadership enhance children's development, provide specific and necessary supports for families, and serve as a critical pillar across all care settings. Today, 23% of all child care workers are Latina, and 22% of all child care workers are immigrant women.⁹ Latina and immigrant ECE educators play a vital role in providing the early learning experiences that bilingual and bicultural families seek, in enhancing the learning experiences of all students in their care, and in addressing the ECE workforce shortage.

Despite their added value to the ECE system, Latina and immigrant child care providers are significantly undervalued, being among the lowest-paid groups in the ECE sector.¹⁰ It is beyond time for the United States to celebrate and invest in the early educators who bring diverse skills, promote inclusivity and cultural diversity, and yet face significant additional barriers to entering and staying in the field. This brief will provide a deeper analysis of the value and contribution of Latina ECE educators, many of whom are immigrants and/or speak a language other than English, and provide recommendations to intentionally recruit, support, and retain them through comprehensive reforms in ECE practice and policy.

Presence and value-add of Latina educators in the ECE workforce

Throughout the history of the United States, the early childhood education workforce has been made up predominantly of women, disproportionately women of color and immigrant women. Today, over 90% of early educators are women, and women of every race and ethnicity are overrepresented in ECE. As of 2022, Latinas make up 23.5%¹¹ of child care workers, compared to 8% of workers in all sectors.¹² Latina early educators hail from a wide range of countries of origin, with the top five nationalities represented in the field being Mexican (54%), Puerto Rican (9%), Dominican (7%), Salvadoran (5%), and Colombian (5%).¹³ Like Latinxs in general, not all Latina early educators are immigrants. However, more than two in 10 workers in the child care workforce (22%) and more than one in 10 pre-K/K teachers (13%) are women born outside of the U.S. (compared to 8% of people working in all sectors being women born outside of the U.S.).¹⁴ Among the early educators who are immigrants, roughly half are naturalized citizens while the other half are noncitizens.¹⁵

Additionally, while the number is not directly available for early educators specifically, it is important to remember that for the whole of the Latinx population, nearly a quarter of Latinxs (24%) identify as Afro-Latinx.¹⁶

The presence and value of Latina early educators is even stronger in home-based child care (HBCC) and through family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care. In listed home-based child care across the country, 16% of the providers are Latinx, with the number being even higher in unlisted homes.^{17,18} Home-based child care and family, friend, and neighbor care are the leading choice of care for many, including rural communities, families with babies and toddlers, and Black and Latinx families.¹⁹ For many Latinx families, home-based child care or family, friend, and neighbor care are the care settings of choice because they are more likely to share the cultural, linguistic, and child rearing practices of the family.²⁰ Additionally, home-based and FFN care provide more affordable care that is also accessible during nontraditional hours,²¹ which is care in the early mornings (before 7 a.m.), in the evenings or overnight (after 6 p.m.), and on weekends. This is a necessary option for many families who work nontraditional work schedules, including 41% of Latinx families with children under six.²²

Meeting the child care preferences of Latinx & immigrant families

Caregiving, connection, and community are central to many Latinx cultures and families. As such, Latinx families -whether recent immigrants or many generations in- often seek care for their children that reflects their cultural values and priorities. According to a recent national survey of Latinx parents, 91% stated that multilingual and/or multicultural early childhood education is a top quality they look for in selecting care for their children.²³ Similarly, 90% of parents expressed a desire for their children to be bilingual in Spanish and English, highlighting how important it is for cultural heritage and future opportunities for young children. After giving time, love, and attention, Latinx families consider teaching family values of culture and language as the most important action they are taking to provide their children with a good future.²⁴ While a child care provider not offering culturally relevant teaching doesn't dissuade a Latinx family from choosing that arrangement, a majority of Latinx parents (58%) say it is important for their child care to incorporate Latinx cultural practices, values, and traditions.²⁵ Latina early educators are uniquely positioned to meet these expressed needs. Having educators who reflect their culture and speak their preferred language also allows meaningful engagement and inclusion for diverse families.

Providing language justice

Overall, early educators carry an incredible amount of experience and often formal education and training to their classrooms. Adding to these assets, early educators of color also provide children an opportunity to learn more about different cultures and traditions. While not mutually inclusive, Latina early educators are more likely to also be bilingual or multilingual, which increases the exposure of all students and supports the development of DLL students in their care. With today's increasingly diverse babies and toddlers, the presence of bilingual and bicultural early educators offers dual language support, representation, and culturally responsive practices. In terms of linguistic development, the benefit of the bilingual educator in early education classrooms is clear; DLLs experience very similar amounts of language engagement compared to their monolingual peers in the same classroom.²⁶ This research emphasizes the need for bilingual early educators in early learning settings with DLL students and shows that all students -DLLs and monolinguals- benefit from having a bilingual early educator.

Serving as a critical pillar of the ECE workforce supply

For many Latina early educators, their work with young children is not just a profession, but a calling. Caregiving is a deeply rooted value in Latinx communities and has become an important pathway for entering and staying in the workforce. Latinas early educators are critically important to the stability of the workforce whether in center-based, home-based, or family, friend, and neighbor care settings. Based on available data, Latinas make up 23% of the child care workforce overall, along with 16% of home-based child care.²⁷ However, they likely make up much more of the early childhood education supply and workforce, but the full picture is unclear due to lack of data on FFN care, and for undocumented immigrant caretakers.

Challenges and barriers for Latina early educators

Despite their importance, Latina early educators confront numerous challenges, including inadequate and inequitable pay, language barriers, and lack of support in attaining child care credentials and licensing.

Chronic low pay & pay inequities for Latinas

Due to chronic underinvestment, the child care and early learning field is propped up and subsidized by the low wages of women, women of color, and immigrant women. Early educators are among the lowest paid of low-wage industries.²⁸ Latinas, in particular, are the lowest paid group, earning a median hourly wage of \$10.85.²⁹ For Latina child care workers who are single mothers, the poverty rate exceeds 50 percent.³⁰ On top of this, wage disparities are evident for women of color and immigrant women at all levels of the child care workforce, including center directors. In California, Latina child care center directors make 87 cents for every dollar earned by white or Asian directors, adding up to \$7,700 in lost wages per year.³¹ Ensuring fair wages and pay equity for all early educators will require robust investment that reflects the true cost of care. It will also require additional measures to ensure structured wage growth and pay parity. For example:

- **New Mexico** continues its historic state investment into child care and early education. In FY 2025, New Mexico allocated almost \$800 million for early childhood education.³² The investment includes funds directed to the state's wage and career ladder to help recruit and retain credentialed early childhood professionals. The FY 2025 investment adds to New Mexico's initial investment of \$5 million for infant and toddler early educators. More than half of New Mexico's early childhood workforce is Latina.³³
- **Home Grown**, in partnership with Impact Charitable and five community-based organizations, launched the Thriving Providers Project (TPP), a pilot effort that gave 100 home-based providers from Colorado monthly payments of \$500 for 18 months. TPP was launched in an effort to increase compensation for home-based providers, and surveyed participants were primarily FFN caregivers who identified as female, spoke Spanish, and reported a household income below 200% of the federal poverty level.³⁴
- **The Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE)** out of the University of California, Berkeley conducted a survey examining disparities in wages, leadership roles, and education.³⁵ Data-gathering efforts and accompanying analysis to identify inequities is necessary in order to address and eliminate the racial and ethnic wage gaps that disproportionately impact Black and Latina early educators. Latinas represent the largest portion of California's child care workforce (40 percent).³⁶

Linguistic barriers & lack of targeted support

While the linguistic and cultural skillsets Latinas and immigrant early educators bring to the field are assets, these early educators often do not receive recognition for these linguistic and cultural skills or support in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. Latinas and immigrant early educators frequently do not receive pay commensurate with their skills, lack support within the field to continue their education or professional development in their preferred language, or are deprived of other targeted supports. Several states and organizations are making efforts to better support bilingual, multilingual, and culturally diverse early educators. For example:

- **New Mexico** has various wage supplement programs for early educators. Among them is the Bilingual Incentive, a one-time \$1,500 payment supporting certified bilingual/multilingual early childhood educators who provide direct support to children ages 0 to 5 in state-licensed or -funded programs for a minimum of 20 hours per week.³⁷ In the fourth quarter of FY 2023, 104 participants received \$156,000 in bilingual incentive payments.³⁸
- **Idaho, Mississippi, and Illinois** are among five states planning to use their federal Preschool Development Birth through Five Planning (PDG B-5 Planning) or Renewal (PDG B-5 Renewal) Grants for initiatives to recruit and retain multilingual early educators. Idaho plans to recruit Spanish-speaking home-based child care providers in rural areas with high populations of Latinx families. Mississippi will grant bonuses for programs employing educators who speak a language other than English, and provide bonuses to providers serving families with limited English proficiency. Illinois has proposed increasing compensation for bilingual early childhood educators.³⁹
- **The Council for Professional Recognition**, in awarding the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, recognizes the importance of linguistic diversity and offers the assessment in English and Spanish, and allows for requesting it in another language prior to taking the assessment.⁴⁰ Offering CDA courses and assessment in languages other than English is a critical step for ensuring that early educators are able to showcase their wealth of knowledge appropriately.

Credentials and licensure requirements

Many Latinas and immigrant women also face challenges with education and credential requirements that don't recognize their awarded degrees in their counties of origin, that they must finance in part or in full, and that don't consider varied approaches for different child care settings, at times resulting in educators taking a demotion rather than pursue a degree.⁴¹ There are various approaches to addressing these credential and licensure barriers keeping Latinas from entering or progressing in child care and early learning. For example:

- **Washington D.C.'s** Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) recognizes degrees awarded in counties outside of the United States as long as the foreign credential is evaluated for U.S. equivalency through through an organization that has a current membership with the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES) or the Association of International Credential Evaluators (AICE).
- **Delaware, Minnesota, and Texas** have been identified in a recent 50-state policy scan by Home Grown as the three states that provide the maximum amount of support with licensure, and the highest number of alternative preservice qualifications for small and large home-based child care providers.⁴² Accommodations for home-based and family, friend, and neighbor child care providers are an important tool to retain quality child care providers and create a more equitable child care licensing system.
- **The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (CSPC)** created the Providers Advancing Student Outcomes (PASO) program, an intensive 120-hour, 15-week ECE curriculum to support the professional development of FFN providers and allow them to apply for the CDA credential.⁴³ Many FFN providers in Colorado are undocumented immigrants, and CSPC has successfully changed policies and state laws to support undocumented providers; in 2015, CSPC successfully advocated to the Council for Professional Recognition to remove the requirement that made the CDA only available to providers with Social Security numbers. In 2021, CSPC successfully advocated for a law allowing people to apply for professional, commercial, and occupational licenses including child care licenses, regardless of their immigration status.⁴⁴

Recommendations

Federal and state policymakers can take several steps to better ensure Latinx early educators receive the supports they need and deserve, have opportunities for input into the ECE programs and policies that affect them, and are positioned to fully apply their knowledge and skills in educating and caring for children. The following recommendations include broad strategies for bolstering the early care and education system as well as strategies specifically designed for early educators who are immigrants and/or who speak a language other than English. Note, however, that being Latina is not synonymous with being an immigrant, or speaking a language other than English, and it is essential to recognize the diversity among Latina early educators in adopting and implementing these recommended policies.

- **Ensure robust and sustained federal funding for early childhood education:** Funding should ensure that more families have access to affordable care, and that early educators receive just wages and additional benefits. Increases in funding should include specific measures to increase pay for early educators overall, and ensure pay parity for women of color and immigrant women at all levels of the early childhood education workforce.
- **Promote the value of culturally and linguistically relevant early learning opportunities:** Elevating the value of culturally and linguistically diverse early learning opportunities is needed in early childhood education, including the recognition of the value of home-based child care and family, friend, and neighbor care. This is critical to meet the needs of a rapidly diversifying population, and to truly acknowledge the assets of bilingual and bicultural early educators.
- **Expand language and cultural support services for families and providers:** Every person should get the information they need in the language they prefer. Information on programs and support services should be available for families in their home language, and educators should be supported in the workforce and through education and professional development opportunities available in their preferred language.
- **Streamline recognition of foreign credentials:** Encourage states to create streamlined processes for recognizing and validating foreign credentials and qualifications. Ensure fair and efficient recognition of immigrant workers' qualifications, enabling them to fully utilize their skills and expertise in the workforce, and receive pay commensurate with their educational and career experiences in their countries of origin.
- **Ensure that all child care and early education workers have access to professional development opportunities, regardless of citizenship status:** The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should guide states on how to leverage the existing immigrant care workforce, particularly in light of the workforce shortage. One opportunity for this exists in providing support for immigrant care workers who are interested in pursuing professional development opportunities, but who may be limited by cost, time, or immigration status. Immigrant care workers should have equal access to support systems to pursue the education necessary to grow professionally. Similarly, immigrant students should have access to financial and other support to pursue licensure, certification, apprenticeships, or degrees to enter the ECE workforce.
- **Actively involve Latina, immigrant, and multilingual educators in policymaking and implementation processes:** HHS should actively include Latina early educators, immigrant early educators, and dual or multilingual early educators in policy discussions and decision-making, ensuring that policies are informed by their valuable input and perspectives based on their lived experiences. This is consistent with Executive Order 14094 (April 6, 2023) on Modernizing Regulatory Review and OMB's July 19, 2023 guidance on broadening public participation and community engagement in the regulatory process.

Conclusion

Latina early educators possess strengths that are beneficial to the children in their care, the families they work with, and the workforce overall. Latina child care workers bring many assets to their classrooms, including their linguistic and cultural skills, along with their years of experience. Their value in creating a strong and diverse early educator workforce cannot continue to be understated, undervalued, and undercompensated. Practice, policy, and research must recognize what an asset diverse early educators are, and intentionally create and amplify systems of support to retain women of color and immigrant women in the workforce, including those who are home-based and family, friend, and neighbor child care providers.

1 This brief will utilize the term "Latinx" to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. Latinx will be used in place of the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" which are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau. The use of "Latinx" for the purposes of this brief is in an attempt to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

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