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PREPARING LATINO CHILDREN FOR KINDERGARTEN: TWO POSITIVE APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

School districts need children entering kindergarten to be “school ready,” that is, to possess a certain standard of skills and knowledge to be successful students at the kindergarten and later levels. Latino children, usually Mexican, whose families are monolingual Spanish-speaking recent immigrants to Colorado from small towns or farming communities in northern Mexico, often lack this preparation, for cultural and economic reasons. Two approaches, one within a public school and one operating in private homes, both appear to be successful in preparing this Latino population for future success in school. The school approach brings children up to age four into the school for two hours twice weekly with their mothers, where they acquire skills and where the mothers learn how to continue this learning process at home. The home approach, known as Family, Friend & Neighbor, trains home providers of child care in how to educate young children.

KEY WORDS: Latino, preschool education, school ready

INTRODUCTION

School districts need children entering kindergarten to be “school ready,” that is, to possess a certain standard of skills and knowledge that will help them to be successful students at the kindergarten and later levels. A child age five who is not “kindergarten ready” entering school in August will be unlikely to catch up and achieve grade-level competence by the end of the kindergarten year, and this lag will very likely continue during the succeeding years of primary school and thereafter.

Typically, parents prepare their children for kindergarten through educational activities in the home and/or through placement in day care centers during their pre-kindergarten years, and many parents successfully prepare their children for kindergarten in this way. They are able to do this because they themselves have high levels of formal education and have educated themselves on how best to prepare their children for school success. They also have adequate means to avail themselves of good pre-schools and day care centers to complement their own activities. As a result, their children arrive at kindergarten knowing numbers, the letters of the alphabet, colors, shapes, how to write their own names, perhaps some rudimentary reading and writing ability, and how to socialize. In addition, these children at age five speak well the language of kindergarten and later school instruction: English.

Some children, however, are very often not so “ready” or well prepared: Latino students, usually of Mexican descent but occasionally from Central or South America, whose families are recent immigrants to the United States. In Colorado, most of these immigrants are from northern Mexico, often from rural areas of Chihuahua and other states, either from small towns or farming communities. The schooling in rural northern Mexico is not of high quality.

School facilities are often sparse, textbooks and other materials are old and heavily used, and resident teachers receive a minimum of training. Rote learning is emphasized over creative thinking. The more distant the community is from a larger town, the less likely the teachers are to arrive regularly or punctually. Little is expected of the students by their parents, who often have little school education themselves, or their teachers, who receive scant support from the education authorities. It is in light of this educational culture that the educational levels of the parents need to be viewed.

According to the Latino Early Childhood Education (LEChE) report of 2011 (Heublein, Vigil, and Garcia 2011: 17), about 60 percent of the fathers of Latino children indicated that they had completed kindergarten through ninth grade, and a somewhat smaller percentage of mothers had completed those grades. Another 20 percent had completed high school, while another 20 percent had some higher education. Thus, about 40 percent of parents had at best a high school education in Mexico in generally inadequate schools.

If they are not compelled to do otherwise, immigrant Mexican parents are often reluctant to place their children in preschools, due to a cultural belief that children should lead a sheltered existence in their first five years of life. In two studies (Ward and LaChance 2011; Mile High United Way 2010), mothers expressed the feeling that their children should be at home, that their children deserved to take it easy during their early years, and that they would have a hard enough time once they started school. Thus parents – usually mothers – often prefer to keep their children at home age birth to five.

Many immigrant families, however, find themselves forced to find childcare for their young children when both parents need to work in order to make ends meet. The solution is nearly always to have a family member, a neighbor,

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or friend they know well take care of the child, and given the normal eight-hour workday, this means the child is at the home of this person eight hours per day or more. Mexican immigrant parents are comfortable with this arrangement because it seems to mirror the care that they themselves would provide. The child is watched so that he or she will not become injured, he or she is fed during the day, and he or she is provided a minimum of entertainment through the medium of the television.

Whether the child remains in the home or is cared for by a family member, friend, or neighbor, the experience of the child contains little educational stimulation, because neither the mother nor the child care provider has the understanding of the importance of early childhood education, since it was not an important part of their own upbringing and they would not have observed it while growing up. In addition, early childhood education was not considered important, since it was felt that the child's education would begin at age five upon entering school. Children would therefore not learn much in the way of socializing with peers, numbers, the alphabet, writing, drawing, the use of scissors and crayons, the identification of shapes, and any number of other early childhood educational elements that would prepare them for Kindergarten. In addition, the child would almost certainly learn only Spanish before the age of five, and language stimulation would in any case not be rich because parents often do not understand the importance of language development in relation to school readiness, nor do they necessarily have expanded vocabulary themselves.

As a result, Mexican immigrant children very often arrive at Kindergarten behind their peers in both the language of Kindergarten instruction as well as the basics of early education and group socialization. Testing at the beginning of Kindergarten in the Boulder Valley School District confirms this. The table below provides the percent of Latino children in each of four years in four schools who meet the grade level literacy target.

Table 1: Fall Kindergarten - Percent (Number) of Latino Students Meeting Grade Level Literacy Target, Boulder Valley School District

SCHOOL YEAR 2006/07	SCHOOL YEAR 2007/08	SCHOOL YEAR 2008/09	SCHOOL YEAR 2009/10
14% (12 of 83)	11% (6 of 55)	22% (13 of 60)	8% (3 of 40)

In contrast, the approximate percentage of Anglo students that meet the grade level standard entering kindergarten is about 80 percent. If the educational achievement gap between Latino and Anglo children is ever to be attenuated, the disparities must be addressed long before these children even reach kindergarten.

Two approaches show promise regarding this situation, one developed within the school system – called Early Excellence – and the other outside it – called PASO. This article reports on descriptive evaluations of both approaches carried out by the author. The evaluations were carried out between 2008 and 2010 when the author was employed by Mile High United Way of Denver (Early Excellence, 2008-09) and by the Center for Alternative and Responsible Education and the Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (PASO, 2010). Both evaluations involved interviews (in English and Spanish) and focus groups (in Spanish). All translations which appear in the remaining sections of this article were carried out by the author.

THE EARLY EXCELLENCE APPROACH

Early Excellence (also known as Play and Learn) is an early childhood program for children ages zero to four years of age and their parents or caregivers. The program is provided mornings for two hours twice a week. Mothers or caregivers arrive with their children at 9 a.m., the child explores for about 15 minutes, then targeted activities are provided, including manual arts (coloring, using paper, cutting with scissors, etc), singing and dancing, snack time, a visit to the gym or outdoors, clean-up, and final song. Parents have a morning once a month to get together without their children to learn about child development, ways to help their children continue learning at home, community resources, and other topics.

The program benefits children, both directly through the activities provided for them in the classroom, as well as indirectly through their parents' continuation of teaching-learning activities in the home. Parents benefit by learning how to best participate in the teaching-learning process while their children are very small as well as how to continue through elementary school.

The program has two goals: (1) to increase the school readiness of preschool students, and (2) to increase parent involvement in their preschool children's education. Children who have participated in Early Excellence are more ready to succeed in ECE, the quality Denver Preschool Program (DPP) for all four year olds in the Denver Public Schools. Children moving from ECE to Kindergarten are also more capable of success at the Kindergarten level, and these children eventually do better in third grade reading.

The best example of this program is found at an elementary school in Denver (which I will call "Public"), where a trained preschool teacher began the experiment in 2004. In 2008 and 2009, the author carried out an evaluation of this program under the auspices of Mile High United Way. The evaluation included the following activities: in-depth interviews with the teacher at Public, focus groups with parents with children at Public, observation at Public to view activities, and a final report that incorporated the qualitative information in a set of recommendations concerning the Early Excellence/Play & Learn model at Public and elsewhere. The present article is based on this evaluation.



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The interview with the teacher plus the focus groups with the parents of children attending the programs at the school looked at various aspects of the program, such as the teacher's experience, specific training received by the teacher, what the curriculum is based on, personnel other than the teacher in the classroom, planning of activities, the ages of children in the program, strategies for the recruitment of children and parents, scheduling of activities, information provided to the parents, registration requirements for parents, arrival and departure times at the program, a typical day at the program, ethnic and linguistic considerations, the impacts of the program on parents, and the impacts of the program on children.

Personnel

The key individual in the Early Excellence program is the teacher at Public from 2003 through 2010, whose education consisted of a major in Spanish, a minor in reading, and an endorsement in elementary education from Metropolitan State College of Denver (MSCD). She did student teaching at Public, and for three years was a Kindergarten teacher there working with the Spanish-speaking children. Instruction was all in Spanish but there was also instruction in English for vocabulary development. She later became a literacy coach at Public for a few years before beginning as the Early Excellence teacher.

This teacher received no specific training to be an Early Excellence teacher. She pointed out that she had been a Kindergarten teacher and that she tried to orient her Early Excellence classes toward what she knew Kindergarten and ECE teachers hoped to find in children beginning those grades in school. She also mentioned the DPS standards and said those standards provided her with a starting place to design the program. She also said that early on teachers at other Early Excellence sites would meet regularly and present activities that each felt was working in their classrooms, with the idea that they could all use these ideas to make the program cohesive among all the school sites.

The teacher has a paraprofessional half-time employee paid by the school who works with her in the classroom, and she has two volunteers – mothers of children in the program – who work with her each week as well. She said she can manage with the paraprofessional and just one volunteer if need be, but she prefers to have two volunteers due to the large numbers of children. These volunteers rotate the position among the group of 10. The volunteers receive a stipend for each day they work. She uses her Wednesdays to do planning, which usually involves herself, the paraprofessional that works with her, and those volunteers who are working that week or the next, but these planning days are not paid.

The initial recruiting strategy in 2004 included a table at "back to school" night, flyers, pasting notices on doors, bulletin boards, grocery stores, and churches, and gift cards for coming in to check out the program. Since the first year, however,

there has been no need to recruit, as the quality of the program has sold itself, and parents recruit other parents through word of mouth.

The registration requirements include an application in Spanish and English, a copy of the child's birth certificate, and proof of residence. The teacher explains to parents why they require this information. Children receive a Denver Public Schools Identification Number that they will continue to use as they progress through the school system. The program collects attendance through sign-in sheets from the parents and caregivers at the time of arrival.

Program Setting

Originally, the goal of the program was to target children less than five years old, but this was before the Denver Preschool Program began placing all children age four as of October 1st each year into a pre-Kindergarten program called Early Childhood Education, or ECE. The teacher does have four year olds who turned four after the October 1st deadline in her Early Excellence classes, as well as four and five year olds in her morning classes that attend ECE or Kindergarten in the afternoon.

She also has an area in her room reserved for babies and toddlers, and the mothers found this very attractive. One mother said:

The teacher explains the different areas and places they need for the class, especially for babies from 0 to 24 months, so it's good organization regarding the safety of the children. There are specific areas for babies, and from the first time you arrive, you know which area is for each age child.

The program at Public operates four days a week, Monday – Tuesday and Thursday – Friday. The program begins at 9 a.m. and ends at 11 a.m. The teacher does the Monday – Tuesday classes in Spanish and the Thursday – Friday classes in English, although on any day she will speak to any parent personally in the language that person feels comfortable speaking. The teacher's policy concerning arrival is that parents can arrive with their children at any time and they will be welcome. The important thing is that they come. She says that parents know the schedule and can begin to participate in whatever activity happens to be in progress at the time they arrive.

She has so far placed no limits on the number of parents and children that attend her program. The total number of children registered in the program is usually over 100, but she points out that not everyone comes every day, some drop out completely, and even those who come regularly may limit their attendance to just one or two of the four days the program is offered.

The teacher provides an information sheet and oral explanations to all parents concerning the activities in the program, how she as the teacher and they as parents should in-



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teract with the child, and what the children will learn when they play at each table. In addition, there is a schedule of activities for the week posted on the wall in the classroom. She also provides information on how she begins teaching the children to write, how parents can be more patient with their children, and topics such as nutrition, discipline, and parenting skills.

A Typical Day

On a typical day, the program begins at 9:00 a.m. Parents and other care givers sign in. Children spend the first 15 minutes exploring the room and perhaps playing with a toy they encounter. The next hour is divided into 15-20 minute segments where different activities are highlighted, such as making simple figures from paper, playing with clay, drawing and coloring, gluing Cheerios to paper, or other activities that help them learn hand-eye coordination and things such as colors. Another common activity involves singing songs and either clapping or dancing to the songs. At around 10:00 a.m. the children have snack time where they eat and drink what their parents have brought from home, followed by an organized clean up accompanied by a special song. After snack time, the children may be taken to the gymnasium for free play or just to run around and play with balls, or they may go to the music room for more music, song, and dance. If the weather is nice, they may also go outside to play.

This typical schedule does not need to be followed to the letter by all children. As one parent said:

There is a schedule, for example, 20 minutes of writing, 20 minutes of reading, but this doesn't mean the child has to be sitting down those 20 minutes writing. There are days when the child doesn't want to, but maybe another day he wants to read more, or maybe he wants to play more, maybe he spends his time writing, so it's not that just because there's a schedule do they have to follow it to the letter, that you have to spend exactly a certain amount of time in a particular thing, no.

Impacts on Children and Parents

Parents accompany their children at all activities, and the teacher urges the parents to participate as the children's first teachers in these activities. The teacher is careful to monitor the activities to ensure that the child is the one working to carry out the activity and not the parents. She has noted that many parents are frustrated by the fact that their children do not produce "pretty" art work, and they may shoulder the child aside to "fix up" the art work so that it is more attractive. She emphasizes to the parents that it is not the finished product that is important but the learning process that is involved. If the child does not work on the activity, the child does not learn what the activity is intended to teach. Parents

eventually accept the ideas presented by the teacher, who also emphasizes that parents should have their children doing similar activities at home with encouragement and a minimum of interference from the parent.

Another lesson for parents during the program is how to speak to their children. The teacher has noticed that some parents at the beginning speak very critically to their children, saying things like 'what you're doing is ugly, look you're painting badly, oh you're dumb you throw everything.' She points out that this way of talking is harmful and that the parents should try always to encourage their children, giving them numerous opportunities to do what is asked of them in an activity, and to praise the finished product as something that the child has accomplished, regardless of how it looks.

Those who attend the program are overwhelmingly Latino (or Hispanic), and many of the mothers (and a few fathers) who attend speak only Spanish. The teacher says that at the beginning there was just one African American family and two white families. Now there are more white parents and children but the smallest group continues to be the African American one. She also noted that the number of fathers participating has grown, both white and Hispanic, although the participation is still overwhelmingly by mothers. The fact that the teacher teaches two days in Spanish and two days in English provides the English speaking population an easy entrance into the program.

One important impact on parents is found in the fact that they can dedicate a period of time exclusively to their child. One of the mothers at this teacher's program, who earlier had attended a program at another institution, that gave mothers training on teaching their children, said much the same thing:

I couldn't put into practice at home the things I was learning in [the other program] because the children just didn't want to, since it's their home and they want to play what they want, but here it's understood that in the class, it's not that way, because there is the teacher, whom they need to respect, there's a routine to follow, so they know that "now I have to write my name, now I have to read books, now I'm going to play, now it's time for activities at the tables," so I said to myself, I came for just two hours but I knew I had worked with my children and had taught them something, so when I got back home, I could dedicate myself to my home, cleaning or whatever else, but I knew that I had dedicated time to my children.

Another impact is acquiring a realization of the importance of learning small skills that will be important later on. The teacher at Public said:

They continue at home what they're learning here. And they're seeing the value: where before when their child showed an interest in cutting paper, they would say 'Oh put that away, you're



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not going to cut paper' but now they say 'let's practice cutting because you need this skill.' Before where parents weren't seeing the value of what their child's interest was, they now think that's going to help them when they get into school.

Sometimes this has not been an easy process for parents. As the author observed in the classroom, some parents appeared to shoulder their child aside so that they, the parents, could produce an attractive piece of work. The teacher said:

I would see that a child didn't have a lot of interest in doing the work but the mother WAS interested in doing it, and it was hard for me to keep the mother from doing the work for the child. In order for the child to do it, I would go around the tables, and if I saw a mother who was doing it, I would say to the child that he was painting and the mother would let go of the brush and the child would paint. I didn't say it directly to the mother. But now I see that if I go toward a table, the mothers don't pick up the brush or the Resistol or anything and they let the child do it himself.

The experience in the classroom is supplemented by monthly classes in child development and other topics that are directed toward improving parents' role as the child's first teacher. The program provides an opportunity for parents to get information they have no other way of acquiring, and they ask lots of questions. The teacher says the most common question is how the parents can be more patient with their child, but they also ask about how to help the child learn to write his or her name, about nutrition, discipline, and other parenting skills. Parents learn from the teacher but they also learn from each other. As she said:

They're learning from each other, and they watch what the other kids are doing and they say I want my child to be doing that too, and they watch that parent and how they got to that point, and when they run into questions, when they start to feel comfortable, they're ready to go to the next step.

Parents also begin learning the importance of participation in activities outside of class. Parents who have spent more time in the program are the ones that become volunteers with the program at Public, and they tend to continue once their child has moved on to ECE and Kindergarten. These mothers become active in the Collaborative School Committee (CSC), they are more ready to advocate for their children, and they ask good questions in the Parent Teacher Conferences, such as how they can support the teacher and what kind of activities they should do to help their child.

The parents expressed their opinions about the impact of the program on them in the focus group:

- 1) We are learning so much about how to educate our children, learning how to talk to them, because it may be that in our culture we didn't know how, and perhaps we're very closed about raising children, understanding them, and so for me it's been very interesting.
- 2) I really didn't have much patience with my children and now I do have lots of patience with them, for example, in my home when I'm doing something, my daughter will want to read, she wants to read all the time, so she says to me 'Mom, read me the book' and I stop what I was doing and I sit down to read with her, and the same with my son.
- 3) I've learned how to recognize the different abilities that my son has, what he likes to do most, and to do that with practice, and I have more patience with him.
- 4) I like learning participation in class, because I didn't participate in class, since I only have the boy and the girl. Now I read them books, not like before. I've learned to help them write their names and to draw.
- 5) I learned to have more patience, and I think we've improved a lot.
- 6) I've learned to have more patience with them too, to play with them wherever we are, we're always playing and singing, and before I didn't do that. And I've learned to talk to them with more gentleness.

Impacts on Elementary School

The Public principal had a number of comments relating to impacts on parents, not just while they were parents of Early Excellence children but also later on as parents of children in the elementary grades at Public. She stressed how parents from the program became key members of parent organizations at Public, such as the Collaborative School Committee (CSC), which provides parent input for school programs and communicates school information to a wider audience of parents. Thirty of the 34 CSC members, who are elected by the parents as a whole, were former Early Excellence parents, and they have learned to understand budgets; they assist with input on teachers at each level, including the number of teachers, including assistant teachers, who teach in each classroom; and they have provided ideas of penalties that might be applied to parents who do not come to parent-teacher conferences. The principal believes that families that have participated in the program have moved their children between schools and have worked to continue at the same school, Public.

The teacher commented on the feedback she has received from the teachers where the children go to ECE and preschool:

What we're hearing is that kids coming from Early Excellence are more academically and socially prepared to be there. Compared to a



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child that's never been in school, they're coming in knowing more, and with a larger oral vocabulary, which is one thing that we struggle with in the inner city.

One parent at Public noticed the impact of the program on her younger daughter when she compared her with her older daughter, who did not have the advantage of the program:

Once I was visiting a friend and she said there was a program for before Kindergarten, that I could come with my daughter for free, and I was happy because my first daughter was 5 years old and she was in Kindergarten and had a lot of problems because I couldn't pay for a preschool, and so she didn't go to any program, and she didn't know her letters, she didn't know her name, and each time I worked with her at home she would get mad, 'Mom, I don't want to work, let me be.' I've got lots of problems with her and she's still behind at school. Now she's in first grade and again she's got problems with reading, and my second daughter came to Early Excellence and now she's only 4 and she can write her name and she knows the letters, she knows all the colors. She's better prepared for when she goes to school and also she's with other people that speak another language.

The parents also see the program as a way of socializing their child:

- 1) I saw that in addition to exploring, the children were acting more independent from the parents, and they were interacting socially with more children and with different adults.
- 2) My daughter used to be very attached to me and now she's not, now she's more independent, she socializes with the other kids, and she really likes to paint, draw and all this she has learned here.

The teacher says that having children in Early Excellence allows her to spot potential problems with young children so that they can be assessed and treated before ECE and Kindergarten. She refers children with possible problems to a program for early testing of children. This way when they go to ECE they have a learning plan with the inputs they are going to need, whether it is speech, physical therapy, or some other treatment.

Self esteem is one of the important ways the program impacts children. They learn that they can be accepted by others, for example when they are singing and dancing, and they can dance in the middle of the circle. They are not alone, apart from the others, but rather integrated into the group, and this provides them with confidence and self esteem. For example:

- 1) We go up the stairs and there are children that are a year old and they want to go up the stairs by them-

selves, and we walk down the halls, I watch them walking so secure in themselves.

- 2) There are children that don't want to get separated at all from the parent, from the time they come to the program for two or three weeks, and I've watched them as they begin to separate themselves, to get together with other children, and that seems to me a big impact.

There are also women who come to the program who bring their own children but who also bring children who are not their own that they care for:

They bring their own children and the children that they take care of, who are usually Anglo children. These children don't come with their parents to the classes, but the parents more than once have come to visit the program to see how it works, but it's the babysitters who bring them to the program.

In conclusion, the Early Excellence approach is successful because it provides early stimulation and socialization for (mostly Latino) children less than four years old, but even more because it provides a setting in which parents and other caregivers can learn strategies and techniques that help them to success as the child's first and most important teacher.

THE PASO APPROACH

The Colorado Statewide Parent Coalition (CSPC) and the Center for Alternative and Responsible Education (CARE) instituted a program for the systematic professional development of Mexican and other Latino early childcare providers. The program, called Providers Advancing School Outcomes (PASO), focused on what has become known as Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) care, which refers to child care provided by unlicensed, legally exempt relatives, friends, or others in the community, as differentiated from regulated "formal" childcare, care provided by licensed childcare centers or licensed family childcare homes. PASO was carried out in Boulder County from 2006 to 2010.

A training and support model for Spanish-speaking FFN providers in Boulder County resulted in the PASO program, which included child development training, health training, and health screening and services. The program was based very closely on extensive knowledge of the culture of the Latino immigrant community, and the determination was made early to assure that the program followed and respected those cultural norms. One aspect of this was to make sure that the information and training for the providers was conveyed by persons who were close to the community and part of that same cultural tradition. To that effect, it was decided that they would identify and hire three trainers for each of the three Boulder County communities of Boulder, Longmont, and Lafayette.

The purpose of the program was to enhance language, literacy, numeracy, and social development for Latino children



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in poverty, younger than five years of age, with a goal of promoting school readiness and eventually reducing the school achievement gap between Latino and non-Latino children. The activities designed to achieve the program goals included the following:

Provide training on early childhood care and education to Latino FFN providers in Boulder County.

This was accomplished through the presentation of 30 separate 3-hour seminar classes by the Program Coordinators and the Program Trainers – referred to in the program as *Tías*, or “aunties” – over a period of 18 months. This training was supplemented by visits twice a month by the *Tías* to the homes of the caregivers to respond to questions, make sure all the relevant points were understood by the caregivers, and to discuss with them how the information might be applied to the care and education the caregivers were providing to the children. The sessions in the training program included the following: First Aid, CPR, Multiple Intelligences, Material Utilization, Medicine Administration, Contagious Diseases, Children’s Play, Health and Safety, Preventing Child Abuse, Materials Production, Weekly Routine, Communication and Language, Healthy Nutrition, Discipline, Language/Literacy Development, Professional Management and Self-Assessment, Early Math, Children’s Emotional Development, Supporting Children with Special Needs, and Working with Parents.

Provide materials and training to caregivers to help them convert their homes into learning centers for small children.

During one of the 3-hour classes, trainees were taken to the home of a caregiver who had converted her home a learning center to view how this could be done. Each caregiver was then

provided with a variety of basic educational materials and instructions for their use: wall posters with numbers and letters; broad low-level shelves to store toys and other materials; tables and chairs with short legs for small children; manipulative materials; games; literacy and numeracy materials; natural science objects; crayons, markers, paints, finger paints, scissors, and other materials for art work; objects for teaching colors; and books in Spanish that were developmentally appropriate for this age group. All materials were provided with a view toward helping the caregiver convert whatever area they had available into a small learning center. When the area available was very small, such as in a trailer or small apartment, the caregiver worked together with the *Tías* to design the most efficient use of the space available.



Figure 2: After picture of a caregiver's home

Provide training to parents of children receiving early care services on educational topics, and language and literacy development.

This was done through 3-hour discussion classes on 10 topics presented over 10 weeks to parents. The program organized presentations for men only (called *Los Padres*) and for women only (called *Las Madres*) to allow for freer discussion of family dynamics. Many of the topics mirrored those provided for the caregivers in an effort to bring about better coordination between parents and caregivers in the care of the children.

Provide health services for the children served to accompany health training for the providers.

In light of evidence that Latino children generally had not received equitable health care, especially dental care, the program included specific health services. The program found that around 80 percent of children up to age five, or about 240 of the 300 children, had moderate to severe dental needs, includ-

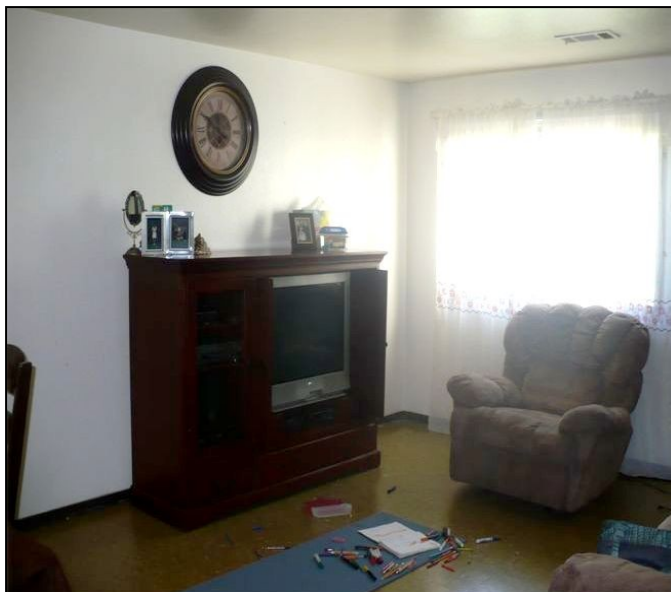


Figure 1: Before picture of a caregiver's home

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ing tooth decay, bottle mouth, and even gum disease. Vision problems were found among 15 percent of children and auditory problems among 10 percent of children. The program provided dental, developmental, general health, vision, social-emotional, hearing, and literacy screenings. Children who needed dental care, glasses, or hearing aids received them.

The program caregivers during the three cohorts of the program provided care to about 300 children, but of course the caregivers would continue to work as FFN providers of childcare long after the program had come to an end.

Personnel

It is important to mention the preparation and training of the *Tías*. The PASO coordinators felt that the *Tías* needed to have a certain profile to guarantee the success of the program. They needed to be bilingual individuals who were members of the Mexican immigrant community so that they would be able to understand and relate to the situation of the people with whom they would be working. They would need to be committed to the community orientation of the program of narrowing the achievement gap. They would need to be able to demonstrate commitment to the community, self-motivation, passion for the work, and a willingness to learn, but a university degree would not be essential.

Setting

The context of the PASO program was that of FFN informal childcare carried out by family (a sister, a grandmother, an aunt, or other family member), by a friend (a person well known to the mother of a child and trusted by her), or a neighbor known to the mother. These individuals usually are already involved in childcare with other children, either their own children or the children of others. The reason that a mother would look for someone to take care of her child usually has to do with her employment. In these cases, the childcare situation would generally be more long-term and carried out for an average of eight hours, the normal working day. The child is dropped off with some sort of lunch and with diapers and other supplies, if necessary, and pickup is scheduled between the mother and the caregiver for some time later in the day.

The care provided by the caregiver is not expected to involve a great deal of effort. The caregiver is expected to make sure the child is monitored and safe, that the child is fed when hungry, that the child has the opportunity for a nap, and that the child has some opportunity for entertainment, which usually involves any program on the television, mostly *novelas*. The care provided to children left by other parents generally mirrors the care the caregiver provides her own children, while she continues to do usual household chores.

Recruitment

The recruitment of caregiver participants was carried out with Latino immigrants, who are overwhelmingly from Mexico. A sizeable proportion of these Latino immigrants is undocu-

mented, and the experience of this community has made them understandably cautious about any sort of relationship with the non-immigrant population, including groups, institutions, and individuals that might represent some sort of risk of detection by the immigration authorities.

The initial point of the program was to find providers who took care of children in their homes and who were Latinos who spoke Spanish in the home. The *Tías* – fluent in Spanish and natives of Mexico – were charged with the task of recruiting these providers, and they used a series of strategies, some more productive than others. The *Tías* found that they needed to make contact personally with people to tell them directly how the program worked, and this needed to be done in an informal way as opposed to some organized setting. They began to frequent stores and even bus stops with the hope of finding a woman with children. If this happened, they would ask if they were their own children or if they were taking care of someone else's children. The woman would often understand this to mean that the *Tía* was looking for someone to take care of children, especially since the *Tías* often were accompanied by a child of their own. In any case, this proved to be an icebreaker for the *Tías*, since if the woman encountered did not herself take care of children, she could often refer the *Tía* to an acquaintance who took care of children, often with an address and phone number.

How the Program was Carried Out

The program was carried out in three phases (with identified cohorts) of 18 months each, and recruitment for the second and third cohorts was much easier than for the first cohort, since the program had become well known to the community. Women no longer associated the *Tías* with social services, and they no longer believed that someone was going to check out what they were doing in their homes, to see if everything was clean. They now understood that the program was designed to teach them, so that even before the first cohort was finished, there was already a waiting list for the second group. Women would come to the *Tías* and tell them that they took care of children, that they wanted to be on the list, and that they did not want to miss out on this opportunity.

The training program designed for the caregivers was experimental in the sense that a similar training program had not been attempted in the past. There was therefore some doubt as to whether it would succeed. Specifically, there was the question as to whether the caregivers felt that it was important to make changes in the way they took care of children. In addition, there was the question as to whether the changes suggested by the training coordinators and the *Tías* themselves would be acceptable to the caregivers. The answers to these questions would come from the results of the training process.

Impressions of Caregivers

Not all of the caregivers were impressed initially. They wondered why the other caregivers were there, and thought





that maybe they had just come to see what was happening. Age was a concern for some of the older caregivers. They assumed the program had been designed for younger women and were worried that they might not be able to fit in. It is common for grandmothers to take care of their grandchildren while their own children are working, a tradition they have brought from Mexico. Their age and lack of formal education caused them some concern. A number of women were intrigued by the possibility of learning new things, and their immediate impressions were very favorable. One caregiver said that what impressed her the first day was that the trainers explained many things to the caregivers that they had not known. When asked to elaborate, she said:

[They taught us] how to treat children, because I just treated them the way I knew how, the way I was taught to treat them. But in the program they taught me important things, practical things, things that gave me really good results.

The caregivers were impressed that the training was not just in the hands of non-specialists but also would be carried out by specialists. One caregiver stated:

I thought it was exciting, because I thought the trainers were not actually trained to give these classes. But then the first class was CPR. And when I saw that there were specialists who are specialized in teaching us, I thought so why shouldn't we come here to educate ourselves? The American community thinks we have only come here to work, to give them our children, so they can educate them. So why don't we get them ready to become educated, to succeed along with the American people?

The caregivers were impressed about a number of specific topics given as part of the training by specialists:

- 1) Since every class is different, such as the class in CPR, the person who came was a professional nurse, and she showed us step-by-step what a person should do, how often each step should be done.
- 2) There was a psychologist. We learned about domestic violence and violence against children. We learned about the sexual abuse of children. We learned how you should treat a child who has been the victim of domestic violence.
- 3) I liked the first aid class, and the emotions of children. This is important for us who take care of other people's children to understand child emotions so that we can better take care of them.
- 4) I really liked the class about nutrition, because lots of mothers bring lunch to the school, and all it is, is Coca-Cola and sweets. The Trainer taught me that I have to tell the parents what their children should eat, and what they should bring for their lunch. Now they come to school with good lunches, with fruit, bread, and juice.

Interestingly, even after probing, none of the caregivers could name a topic they did not like or did not find interesting. They were equally interested in both the topics with practical application, such as nutrition and CPR, as well as the topics that were more theoretical, such as the multiple intelligences.

Relationship with Tías

The Tías participated in the Saturday training programs, and they carried out follow up training on the same topics in the caregivers' homes twice a month, following the presentation of a particular topic. The caregivers summarized this dynamic in the following way:

There are things that the person who gave the class explained to us that we didn't quite understand, and the Tía explains these things to us in a way that we can understand.

This follow up is carried out through informally asking about the previous weekend's topic:

She comes to my home and she asks me questions related to the topic we learned the previous week end. She's always careful to make sure that we understand the content of the classes. We are given homework every class, and one of the things she does is to ask us about the homework, how it's going, have we finished it, and so forth. She goes over it with us to make sure that we did it right, and that we have learned what that homework was intended to teach us.

The Tías also provide counseling on problems that arise between the caregivers and the parents of the children they take care of.

I was taking care of my neighbor's child, and sometimes she would bring the child to me and sometimes she wouldn't. One time the Tía ran into this woman and talked to her, and she explained childcare in a different way to her, and from this point, the mother took the childcare process more seriously.

The caregivers underwent a transformation as a result of this program, and they were well aware of it. They are now able to paint the contrast between an ordinary caregiver and one who has gone through the training process that they have gone through:

Anyone can take care of a child, but it's another thing if that person has been in the program and has spent time with one of the Tías and has been taking all of these classes.

The impact of the Tías in transforming the caregivers cannot be underestimated. They have acted in ways that are both practical and inspirational. Concerning practical assistance, the caregivers highlighted the tips and suggestions they had received from the Tías in their home visits. Concerning the inspiration and support provided by the Tías, the caregivers



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were tremendously positive in their comments during the retreat:

- She motivates me to keep going and she gives me ideas to improve myself and the children.
- If it weren't for the Tía, I wouldn't be where I am today.
- Her positivism and happiness are very contagious.
- She has taught me that Hispanic women can do many things.

The primary role of the Tías was to recruit the providers and then to visit them in the weeks following each training to assure that the provider had learned the content and understood how to apply it in her center. One Tía said:

The reason for this was to support the provider if she had some questions, if there was some sort of complication, if she had been ashamed to ask about something, if she did not feel confident, or if she needed more information about what she had learned during the class.

This is a very pleasant part of the visit, an opportunity to get close to the children and interact with them. As one Tía said:

We sit down on the floor with the children. Some times the provider is carrying out some sort of activity with the children, and if so, I just do the activity with the children or I wait until the activity is finished. It often depends on the children themselves, because the children invite me to participate in their activity, so I would sit down with them, and we paint or we make things out of clay or color, or whatever the children are doing at the time. I may ask the provider what the children are learning at this moment. But I do this in a conversational way and not as a test.

The relationship with the caregivers in the setting of the provider's home opens the door to a better understanding of the content of the Saturday classes. It is hard to underestimate the importance of these home visits, because without them, there would be no guarantee that the classes are having the desired impact, and there would also be no way to see how deep the practical impact of the program has been on the providers.

Program Impact

According to the caregivers, the changes in their care have not gone unnoticed by the parents of the children:

They feel we are not just taking care of their children but educating them. We're not just giving their children something to eat and putting them in front of a television set, but teaching the children important things. We don't just put them on a sofa and let them eat; we teach them to eat at the table. We don't let them watch television unless it's an educational program. We go out side to play at certain times, and we take naps

at certain times. It's not easy. But children do learn to put chairs around the table, to set the table, and to clean their plates off the table after they're done. The Tía has been good in helping us to be firm in telling children "no." But "no" without meaning to hurt them, and not to confuse them, because we know that these children live in their homes with parents who may do things differently.

The relationship between caregiver and parents does not always go smoothly, since the parents may have a certain way of doing things which clashes with the methods employed by the caregivers. If a child cries, for example, parents might try to get the child to stop crying by turning on the television, and they might try to get the caregivers to do the same. The caregivers have learned to respond that there are other children and that there are rules that need to be followed, and parents have generally accepted the caregivers' point of view.

One thing that has helped immensely in the caregivers' relationships with the parents have been the parent classes, called (as previously noted) *Los Padres* for men and *Las Madres* for women, which mirror the concepts of the caregiver training and which consist of 10 three-hour classes specifically for the parents. This training is done separately, with fathers having their own training session led by a male facilitator and mothers with their own training session led by a female facilitator. Parents learn the role of play in the child's learning and how certain kinds of play can be more productive than others.

Some of the caregivers participate in the training, but all see the results in their relationships with the parents:

They're learning a lot because I give the class for mothers, and they are often surprised with what they're learning and with what we're teaching their children. We tell them that we're not experts, we are simply learning how to teach children and it's taken some time to do this.

The caregivers at times went to great lengths to get the parents to participate in the training:

One mother was hesitant about taking this class. I had to lie a little bit and tell her about the diploma that she would get at the end, so that she would not have the idea that what she was going to learn was how she could get along better with her child. What interested her in the beginning was the diploma. At first she thought the classes were stupid, and now she's different. She says, 'Now I've learned about the different intelligences of the children, I did this exercise with my child,' and she has forgotten about the diploma.

According to the Tías, the classes, as well as the providers themselves, have been very effective in improving the relationship of the caregiver and the parents.



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A number of parents have become interested in the PASO program, both for the growth they have perceived in their children as well as the changes they have noticed in the care their children have received:

I've seen a lot of changes now that she goes to the caregiver. The woman before just took care of her so that she wouldn't get sick or fall down. But now we've seen her wanting to paint, count things, spend more time with her books. She likes to pretend to give her mother and me classes based on her books, where she takes the role of the teacher. I can see real progress in my daughter, and she's only three years old.

The kinds of changes noted by this parent have been repeated throughout the program with other children and their parents.

CONCLUSIONS AND COMPARISONS

Both the Early Excellence program and the PASO program have been successful, and each approach contains elements that should contribute to future school readiness among the children participants. Early Excellence combines excellent and professional teaching of preschool content while at the same time providing hands-on training of the accompanying parents, so that parents can participate in a positive way in the ongoing education of children in the home. PASO's caregivers have received training and supervision to provide the same teaching of preschool content at a high level, although not perhaps at the level of Public's Early Excellence teacher. The PASO caregivers, however, have the advantage of an entire day to work with the children, and the teacher-child ratio is also much lower at PASO, which allows for considerable personal attention. The PASO program does provide parent education and training, but it is not done with the parent and child side by side, which seems to be an advantage of the Early Excellence approach.

In the end, it is not possible to determine whether one approach is better than the other in regards to results. Each approach works well, so it comes down to the situation of the child's family. If a mother has time available in the morning, Early Excellence is a wonderful program that will make a difference for her child as well as for the mother herself in becoming a motivated, confident, knowledgeable parent of preschool and eventually elementary school children. However, if circumstance requires the mother to work outside the home and she needs to leave her child with a caregiver, a PASO-trained caregiver will provide virtually identical early childhood education for the child and, hopefully, the mother (and father) will learn some positive educational elements to complement that education.

Applied anthropologists need to consider focusing their efforts on education, as this article does, in order to bring together their expertise on cultural analysis, ethnic relations, and differences in educational practices to improve practical

outcomes in the United States and elsewhere.

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