



early developments Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

Spring 2004 | Volume 8 #1

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Survey Highlights Issues in Serving Latino Children

THE CHILDREN ENROLLED in Kara Thompson's pre-kindergarten classroom are working in various interest centers. Several children are looking at a book together in the book corner. Others are tracing letter forms in the writing center, playing with blocks, and putting puzzles together. Kara notices that Benita is quietly observing the other children in the dramatic play area, but she does not enter into play with them. Benita only recently enrolled in the program and Kara is still trying to figure out how much English Benita understands while helping her to get adjusted to the classroom.

Increasingly, early childhood teachers are serving children who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In order to determine how well early childhood programs are addressing the needs of Latino children and families, FPG has conducted a national survey of state administrators of early childhood programs.

Released in 2004, the survey examined administrators' challenges, strategies, and beliefs around serving Latino children and families. Four types of early childhood programs were represented: child care and Head Start, as well as Part B-Section 619 preschool programs and Part C infant-toddler programs for children with disabilities or at-risk conditions.



According to the survey, the enrollment of Latino children in these early childhood programs is increasing. Of the four programs represented, Head Start administrators estimated the highest percentage (28%) of Latino children enrolled.

“Head Start administrators also reported that more than one-third of the parents of these children primarily speak Spanish and this presents a big challenge with respect to outreach and parental involvement,” says Virginia Buysse, FPG senior scientist and principal investigator of the study.

Across all of these programs, administrators reported that the most urgent challenges in serving the Latino population were the lack of Latino or bilingual staff and the lack of sufficient preparation and training of early childhood professionals. Other challenges given high ratings included communication difficulties with Latino families and a lack of information in Spanish about early childhood programs.

“These findings suggest that communication difficulties continue to serve as a significant barrier for Latino families in terms of their full access and utilization of early childhood services,” Buysse says. “Outreach activities to promote early childhood services must take into account a family’s home language and use many different strategies to make this information widely accessible and acceptable to Latino communities.”

Administrators who reported using more strategies also reported lower ratings on challenges. “This suggests that programs that use a wide variety of strategies to serve Latino families may have found ways to overcome the challenges they initially encountered in working with this population,” says Dina Castro, FPG researcher and co-principal investigator of this study. Among the most frequently used strategies were translating written materials into Spanish, hiring professional interpreters, and referring families to other community agencies. The least frequently used strategies included conducting an assessment of needs and resources specific to the Latino community and preparing parents for leadership roles. Ideally, programs could plan the use of these different strategies systematically to allow a gradual move away from solving immediate problems to working toward goals that have a more lasting impact on the well-being of Latino children and families.

All four groups of administrators gave uniformly high ratings to two different curricular approaches for promoting cultural diversity. These include the *additive* approach (also known as “heroes and holidays”) in which ethnic content, concepts, or themes are added to a standard curriculum, and the *transformational* approach, which involves

embedding materials (e.g., books, artifacts) and activities throughout the curriculum and learning environment to enhance children's appreciation of other racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences. "There is growing consensus that early childhood programs must shift from relying solely on additive strategies toward a transformational approach, the goal of which is to create a classroom environment that not only promotes acceptance of diverse cultural beliefs and practices, but also validates the experiences of children from diverse groups by making these activities an integral part of the classroom's daily routines," Buysse says. Administrators also generally endorsed a third approach for promoting diversity that involves providing additional educational opportunities to increase school readiness for at-risk children from diverse cultural groups. One example of this approach is North Carolina's *More at Four* pre-kindergarten program, which currently serves over 10,000 children in the 2003–2004 school year.

Administrators were asked to rank their use of three parental involvement strategies: providing opportunities for Latino parents to participate in making decisions about program policies, involving Latino parents in their children's education, and encouraging participation of Latino parents in parent education and parent support activities. As a group, Head Start administrators reported the highest mean ratings, and Part C administrators the second highest ratings on all three parental involvement strategies presented.

Experts in the field view the preservation of a child's home language as a critical aspect of language development for English language learners. Administrators responding to this survey generally agreed on the importance of this approach. Further, administrators generally agreed with the notion that learning two languages at the same time does not cause confusion or language delays in young children, and that teaching both languages actually facilitates English language learning—findings consistent with recommendations in the literature.



The study found less agreement among groups of administrators on issues related to child assessment. Administrators generally agreed that standardized tests, if used at all, should be translated into Spanish rather than administered through interpreters. (Some experts propose that a more effective approach would involve increasing the availability of culturally and linguistically competent assessors.) Administrators were divided about whether it was advisable to assess young Latino children in their home language or use both their home language and English (some experts endorse the second approach).

“In many ways, the findings of this survey confirm what we already thought,” says Castro. “We knew the enrollment of Latinos in early childhood programs was increasing. We knew the language barrier was a major challenge. The survey also provided new information about what early childhood programs are doing to meet the needs of Latino children. For instance, it was encouraging to learn how many programs are making an effort to reach out to Latino parents, despite difficulties in communicating with these families.”

The national survey is one component of a larger FPG project called *Nuestros Niños*. As part of this project, FPG researchers are assessing program practices to promote diversity and conducting ethnographic observations in classrooms that enroll Latino children in Florida, North Carolina, and Washington. They also are interviewing parents, teachers, and other professionals participating in their study to examine the same issues addressed in the national survey. |ed|

To Learn More

Nuestros Niños Project

www.fpg.unc.edu/~nuestros/

Addressing the Needs of Latino Children: A National Survey of State Administrators of Early Childhood Programs

www.fpg.unc.edu/~nuestros/pdfs/NExecSummary.pdf

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Taking Up the Challenge

New Voices



NUEVAS VOCES

ONE OF THE KEY FINDINGS OF FPG's national survey of early childhood programs is the need for a more qualified workforce to serve the nation's growing Latino community. FPG has responded to that challenge through the creation of New Voices/Nuevas Voces, a project that seeks to enhance the capabilities of a diverse array of professionals working with Latinos in the state of North Carolina.

New Voices gives early childhood professionals and others the training and technical assistance to raise their knowledge, attitudes, and skills in working with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Offered at different locations across North Carolina, the training takes place over a three-day period and covers modules on the foundations of cultural diversity, cross-cultural communication, understanding diverse families and their roles, supporting language development in young English learners, and working with culturally and linguistically diverse children.

"The focus of the training is on Latino families, but the modules' content includes general information about working with families from diverse culture and language backgrounds," says Dina Castro, principal investigator of New Voices.

Lynn Young, a pre-kindergarten teacher in Wake County schools and one of the participants of the New Voices program, used the information to change some of her classroom practices. One example is a storybook activity in which she read the book *Too Many Tamales* with children in her classroom and later sent home an English or Spanish version of the same book (depending on the child's home language) for children to read with their parents. Once the children were familiar with the story, Lynn invited one of the Latina mothers to make tamales at school and share them with the children. On the day of the visit, with help from an interpreter, this mother explained to the children what ingredients are used and how tamales are made.



and works only with other professionals, but from past experience, she knows how valuable cultural sensitivity is in working with families with young children. Haas provides her therapists with materials written in Spanish, which New Voices helped provide. Haas is also trying to weave the content of the training

into workshops on other topics, such as assistive technologies and writing therapy goals.

FPG's New Voices project is now conducting interviews of Latino families to incorporate family perspectives into its training curriculum. Investigators are also working on a book to show service providers how Latino families perceive the services they are getting, and help increase providers' understanding of Latino families strengths and needs. "Rather than a textbook, this represents first-hand experiences of Latino families," Castro says. "It will help service providers understand the perspective of Latino parents."

The New Voices training and technical assistance model is currently being field tested in North Carolina, and will be available to a national audience by the end of the project. This project is funded by the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. **|ed|**

To Learn More

New Voices/Nuevas Voces Project

www.fpg.unc.edu/~nv

The technical assistance component of the project is supervised by Betsy Ayankoya, co-principal investigator. "We offer six months of technical support to all participants, which includes conference calls to discuss specific areas of interest, on-site consultation, a listserv to allow participants to share news and questions, and access to resources through the project's web page," says Ayankoya.

Participants have included preschool teachers, speech language pathologists, early interventionists, and occupational and physical therapists, among others. One of those is Karen Haas, now a physical therapy consultant in Greenville, North Carolina. Haas received the training as a member of a

regional Early Intervention Training and Technical Assistance System (EITTAS) team.

"I wanted the training so I could be a better consultant to the people I work with, who are other physical therapists," Haas says. "After my training at FPG, I sponsored my own workshop for professionals in northeastern North Carolina on how to more effectively serve the Latino community.

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"The FPG [New Voices] staff was extremely responsive," Haas says. "They were willing to work with participants to help them with their particular areas of concern. Based on our feedback, they made revisions to the content for the second training."

Haas does not speak Spanish