

Studies Provide Guidance for Teaching Immigrant Preschoolers

By [Mary Ann Zehr](#)

Princeton, N.J.

A growing number of studies are providing guidance to school districts that are increasingly looking for ways to support preschoolers from immigrant families so that they are ready for kindergarten.

Recent findings from that growing body of work—including studies that examine the effectiveness of tools for measuring preliteracy, explore immigrant preschoolers' access to early-childhood education, and analyze how immigrant children measure up with their nonimmigrant peers academically, socially, and emotionally upon entering kindergarten—were presented here late last month at a conference held in tandem with the release of a [special issue](#) on immigrant children in the journal *Future of Children*. The event, at Princeton University, drew nearly 200 educators.

While the term “immigrant children” can be interpreted in different ways, experts at the April 29 conference defined it to include any child under age 18 living in the United States with at least one parent born in a foreign country. Currently such children account for a quarter of the nation’s 75 million children. By 2050, they are expected to make up a third of more than 100 million children in the United States.

The well-documented academic disparities between many immigrant children and their peers in high school are rooted in early-childhood education, said Robert Crosnoe, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

He pointed out that immigrants to the United States are not a monolithic group. Immigrants from Latin American countries tend to be more disadvantaged than those from Asian countries, for example. But, while preschoolers from Latin American immigrant families are more likely to live in poverty, have mothers with low educational attainment, and have health problems, they also have some strengths.

“They are better behaved than other children,” Mr. Crosnoe said. He said Latino preschoolers have an edge over their African-American peers in their level of social-emotional development, which is something he believes educators can build on.

Getting Ready to Read

Meanwhile, the field of preschool education is “moving in the right direction” in developing effective tools to assess preliteracy for bilingual youngsters, said Sandra Barrueco, an assistant professor of psychology at the Catholic University of America, in Washington.

She recently reviewed 19 preliteracy assessments for their validity and reliability with children who speak Spanish at home. She deemed a quarter of the measures to be suitable, and noted that in a couple of cases, the Spanish versions are better than the English versions. Her findings are published in a book, *Assessing Young Latino Children Within and Across Two Languages: Approaches and Measures*, which is expected to be published in November.

Ms. Barrueco stressed, however, that a preliteracy measure isn’t made valid and reliable for Spanish-speaking children simply by being translated into Spanish. For example, she said, being able to rhyme words is less of a predictor of prereading ability in Spanish than in English, so that ability should not play as much of a role in a preliteracy measure in Spanish as it does in English.

[← Back to Story](#)



While educators may draw on research findings to improve programs for immigrant preschoolers, many immigrant youngsters won't be reached simply because they are less likely than their nonimmigrant peers to participate in early-childhood education.

"The immigrant children are overrepresented in the groups that have lower usage of nonparental care," Lynn Karoly, a senior economist at the Santa Monica, Calif.-based RAND Corp., said in a presentation based on an article published in *Future of Children*. The article says that 55 percent of immigrant 4-year-olds participate in "nursery school or preschool," compared with 63 percent of nonimmigrant children the same age, according to data from the 2000 U.S. Census. Thirty percent of immigrant 3-year-olds take part in such programs, compared with 38 percent of nonimmigrant 3-year-olds.

Barriers to Access

Ms. Karoly said studies show that structural factors tend to hinder immigrant children from getting access to early-childhood education more than cultural barriers do. Structural barriers include families' difficulty paying for programs and the lack of program availability in some immigrant communities. Lack of transportation can also be an obstacle.

Poor-quality early-childhood education is a problem almost equally for immigrant and nonimmigrant children, said Ms. Karoly, characterizing programs as "short on instructional support." She said immigrant children are as likely as nonimmigrants to experience positive short-term effects from early-childhood education, but researchers haven't yet conducted studies that document whether they are also as likely to experience long-term benefits.

Wanting to learn more about how to translate research into practice, a number of preschool teachers from Plainfield, N.J., attended the forum. The school district in that community enrolls 1,400 preschoolers, and 68 percent of them are English-language learners, said Fantasy Ko, a master teacher in Plainfield.

Ms. Ko said the nearly 6,400-student district uses a home-language survey to determine whether preschoolers speak a language other than English at home and interviews parents or other family members to further learn if the children are English-language learners. "You don't want to test [small] children," she said.

The panelists for the meeting did not discuss at length two issues that have been controversial concerning the delivery of services to preschool immigrant children: whether it's better to use informal or formal measures to assess their English proficiency, and whether bilingual education or English-only instruction is preferable.

In the Plainfield school district, ELLs who speak Spanish receive instruction for a day and a half each week in that language, while the rest of instruction is in English.

Margarita Calderón, a professor emerita and senior research scientist at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, presented findings on the elements of high-quality K-12 programs for English-learners. She said such elements include a high level of student-to-student interaction, professional development for all teachers (not just specialists), and a comprehensive approach to teaching academic vocabulary and reading and writing across the subject areas.

After the meeting, Ms. Calderón said that while English-learners need a chance to speak English in preschool, it is best if the programs have a bilingual component to capitalize on the "language they bring already."

She stressed that any instruction in two languages should be provided in separate blocks. The teachers shouldn't switch back and forth between languages or provide translation, she said.

In addition, Ms. Calderón said, many preschool teachers who teach in a language other than English need training so that they ask children higher-order questions in the native language, not just speak commands to children, such as

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