

THE IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION ON THE EARLY SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN FROM IMMIGRANT FAMILIES



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Executive Summary

Immigrant families typically first encounter the U.S. educational system when their children enter pre-school or kindergarten. The experiences these children have in their first classrooms are foundational to how they think about themselves as learners, students, and members of the larger communities around them. When schools view children of immigrants positively—and offer them intellectual, academic, creative, and culturally responsive learning experiences—children are more likely to form positive connections with the larger U.S. society. Conversely, children struggle to overcome negative self-perceptions when schools focus on their deficits—for example, lack of English ability or knowledge of U.S. culture.

Young children of immigrants may experience discrimination personally, through their individual treatment and the kinds of learning experiences schools offer them. They may also experience discrimination structurally, through long-term institutional practices that affect their personal development and academic trajectories. Personal discrimination against children of immigrants in schools primarily takes four forms:

- 1. Negative interactions with school staff and peers.** These include negative comments about children's accents and appearances, impatience with those who struggle to express themselves in English, and tougher discipline than that used with other students.
- 2. Narrow learning experiences.** Under pressure to improve tests scores, teachers may focus primarily on command-driven tasks and rote learning, leaving little room for more creative, child-centered instruction that builds academic engagement, problem-solving skills, and self-esteem. Schools often track young children of immigrants into English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms where inadequately qualified teachers or paraprofessionals provide learning experiences focused on basic English-literacy tasks.
- 3. Low educational expectations.** Children of immigrants often enter school with negative labels: they don't know English or aren't ready for school. They may have cognitive or social skills that schools undervalue or don't recognize. Their academic and social skills may decline with schooling, as they perceive the low expectations of their teachers and peers.
- 4. Devaluation of primary languages.** Educators often devalue bilingualism and home-language skills. For example, they may view the ability to switch between English and Spanish as a problem to be fixed rather than a skill to be developed. Instead of building on children's multiple, complex language and cultural skills, educators often attempt to acculturate them away from home languages and cultures. Studies have shown that strong ties to families and co-ethnic communities support learning, while alienation from them inhibits cognitive and socioemotional development.

Four forms of structural discrimination in schools are discussed:

- 1. School segregation.** Children of immigrants face three different types of segregation in school settings: by race/ethnicity (e.g., Latino versus non-Latino), language, and income. In Texas, for example, nearly one-quarter of schools have majority-Latino, English-learner, and low-income student bodies. Thus, children of immigrants often are concentrated in schools with low exposure to English-fluent students and large numbers of other low-income students who may also face academic disadvantages.
- 2. Lack of high-quality educational resources.** Many children of immigrants attend schools in high-poverty areas that struggle with less-experienced and less-skilled teachers, fewer resources, and lower-than-average academic outcomes. Limited resources and overcrowded classrooms translate into less use of instructional technology and exposure to advanced teaching strategies. ESL programs can further narrow educational opportunities, as these programs often use inferior curricula and poorly designed assessments. Low-income immigrant communi-



ties often lack high-quality preschool programs.

- 3. *Low engagement with parents.*** Teachers are often unable to communicate and engage with immigrant parents. They expect immigrant parents to approach them, while many immigrant parents either feel intimidated or believe it is inappropriate to approach the teachers. When parents are not connected to schools, they cannot effectively advocate for their children or promote their academic engagement and sense of belonging in school.
- 4. *Misdiagnosis of special education needs.*** Educators disproportionately administer language proficiency tests to children learning a new language, and often misdiagnose limited English proficiency as an impediment to learning. As a result, English Language Learners (ELLs) are more likely than their monolingual peers to be placed in special education classes or categorized as having learning disabilities. In these settings, children of immigrants lack access to rigorous and grade-level instructional content.

These types of personal and structural discrimination persist in schools serving immigrant communities for several reasons. Immigrant communities often lack meaningful connections with schools, particularly where the communities are small, new, and not well established. In turn, school staff may struggle to understand the unique needs of children from diverse backgrounds and to engage their parents.

*Many teachers are inadequately prepared
to teach immigrants' children.*

Teachers may develop negative assumptions about immigrants because of lack of information, their assumptions often derived from public policies or majority-culture prejudices. Some teachers try a “colorblind” approach: that all children have the same strengths, needs, and learning styles. But a colorblind approach may deter teachers from building on children’s cultural backgrounds and responding to concerns surrounding their migration, integration, and discrimination experiences.

Many teachers are inadequately prepared to teach immigrants’ children. Few states offer certification in early education and bilingual instruction, and bilingual teachers are scarce—especially experienced instructors who can mentor younger ones.

Finally, schools and teachers face pressures to demonstrate school outcomes under increasingly rigid accountability systems. Historically, prekindergarten and kindergarten were immune from the influence of standardized testing, but recent efforts to align these years with the higher elementary grades have led to a greater focus on testing.

This report offers several recommendations to address discrimination in school settings:

- 1. *Pursue reciprocal, equalizing relationships with parents and communities.*** Teachers should be affectionate and patient with children, learning about incoming students before the school year begins, and learning and using words from their home languages. Teachers should be respectful and patient with parents, approaching them as experts on their children and welcoming them into the classroom.
- 2. *Support representations of diverse cultural and ethnic communities.*** Teachers should build on children’s “funds of knowledge” (i.e., elements of their families’ cultural and linguistic heritage) and incorporate these into classroom instruction. Schools, districts, and federal programs should require teachers to represent cultural and ethnic communities in curricula, lectures, materials, professional development, and policy guidance.
- 3. *Offer dynamic, sophisticated learning experiences.*** Teachers should use a pedagogy encompassing critical thinking, multiple perspectives, and diverse approaches to learning. Cooperative



learning—an approach that encourages students to work in groups to solve problems, complete projects, and work on assignments—invites peer interaction as well as multiple forms of expression, and thus helps English learners build a wider vocabulary. State and federal early learning policies should not only improve access to early education but also ensure that this education includes engaged, creative, and culturally responsive learning experiences.

4. ***Provide teachers with rigorous training in early childhood pedagogy and encourage their connection to immigrant communities.*** Schools need more bilingual/ESL teachers, especially those who are grounded in early childhood education method and theory. These teachers ideally would have specific, in-depth knowledge of early childhood methods and have pursued a specialization that combines bilingual and/or ESL instructional strategies with early childhood pedagogy. This would require changing the current system in most states, where teachers can only pursue a generalist EC-6 (i.e., preK through grade 6) teaching certification with no emphasis on early childhood methods, and a bilingual/ESL certification with (again) little emphasis on early childhood education.
5. ***Invest in creative education strategies for schools serving children of immigrants.*** Policy-makers should invest in schools and programs providing children of immigrants with dynamic and sophisticated learning experiences. Researchers should explore how high-quality early education programs affect these children’s academic success and life outcomes. Also worth exploring are ways to support children’s language development while engaging them in the classroom.

Any experiences of discrimination at this vulnerable age can negatively affect personal development and academic trajectories.

I. Introduction

How the young children of immigrants experience their early school years—that is, prekindergarten (preK) through third grade—may in large part determine their academic future.¹ Immigrant families typically encounter the U.S. educational system for the first time when their children enter preschool or kindergarten. The experiences these children have in their first classrooms are foundational to how they think about themselves as learners, students, and members of the larger communities around them. Any experiences of discrimination at this vulnerable age can negatively affect personal development and academic trajectories, and limit the emotional benefits of early childhood education.

This report maps the types of discrimination that young children of immigrants may experience at school, and the consequences of discrimination for children, their families, and schools. It begins by describing how discrimination in the early years can affect a child’s development, academic performance, and later mobility. The report then outlines types of discrimination—both personal and structural—that young children of immigrants may experience at school. These include negative interactions with teachers and peers, narrow learning experiences, low intellectual expectations, devaluation of home languages, segregation, a lack of high-quality resources and bilingual programs, low teacher or school engagement with parents, and misdiagnoses of special education needs. The report concludes with recommendations that focus on training teachers, building relationships between schools and immigrant communities, and encouraging more varied, culturally sensitive learning experiences.

1 Ruby Takanishi, “Leveling the Playing Field: Supporting Immigrant Children from Birth to Eight,” *The Future of Children* 14, no. 2 (2004): 61-79.



II. How Discrimination in School Affects Young Children

Children usually begin school at the age of 4 or 5, when they are rapidly developing their abilities to communicate, infer, and interact with the society around them. Their sense of belonging starts to move outside their family and neighborhoods to include a wider range of people and ideas. They are learning who they are in relation to the people around them. Most learning that takes place before attending school is observational and social: children learn by watching how people around them interact with them and treat them.

What children intuit about their identity, abilities, and capacity to learn at this age stays with them their whole lives.

The family is arguably the most important setting where children learn and develop. Wen-Jui Han points out that “schools serve as another important influence by being children’s first connection to the external macro-environment and the place where they spend the majority of their day.”² This external macro-environment comprises the influences and structures that children encounter outside the home. School is the first place where young children have intense, daily contact with adults other than family members or immediate community members who are trying to teach them.

What children intuit about their identity, abilities, and capacity to learn at this age stays with them their whole lives. Thus, the school setting can have a profound impact on children’s lifelong well-being and development. Young children—whether from immigrant families or not—benefit from being taught in a positive environment, where their contributions are valued. When schools view children of immigrants positively—and offer them intellectual, academic, creative, and culturally responsive learning experiences—children are more likely to foster positive connections to the external environment. Conversely, when schools focus on their perceived deficiencies, children struggle to dismiss or counter negative self-perceptions.

A. The Effects of Discrimination on Children’s Development and Academic Performance

Discrimination can have particularly negative ramifications for the development of young children’s sense of self and social identity. If people around children communicate distaste for their appearance, language, or cultural values, children internalize negative views of themselves. Discrimination is particularly harmful in the early years, when children are in the process of developing a sense of self.

There is evidence that the way children are treated during early schooling affects their later behavior and academic performance.³ Children who receive negative messages about themselves in school may be less likely to achieve academic success, graduate from school, and ultimately, surpass their parents’ economic position.⁴

2 Wen-Jui Han, “The Academic Trajectories of Children of Immigrants and their School Environments,” *Developmental Psychology* 44, no. 6 (2008): 1572.

3 Ramón Antonio Martínez, “Reading the World in Spanglish: Hybrid Language Practices and Ideological Contestation in a Sixth-grade English Language Arts Classroom,” *Linguistics and Education* 24, no. 3 (2013): 276–88; Dafney Blanca Dabach, “Teachers as Agents of Reception: An Analysis of Teacher Preference for Immigrant-Origin Second Language Learners,” *The New Educator* 7, no. 1 (2011): 66–86; Dafney B. Dabach and Rebecca M. Callahan, “Rights Versus Reality: The Gap between Civil Rights and English Learners’ High School Educational Opportunities,” *Teachers College Record*, October 7 2011, www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=16558.

4 Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2006).



B. *Discrimination and Parental Engagement in School*

Immigrant families may experience particular difficulty engaging with schools. Administrators and teachers often do not speak immigrants' languages, as the language and cultural competence of schools varies widely across the country. One out of four children in the United States has at least one immigrant parent, and almost half (47 percent) of immigrant parents are Limited English Proficient (LEP).⁵ Immigrant parents are even more likely to be LEP in the urban areas where 94 percent of LEP immigrants live.⁶ Immigrants from rare language and cultural backgrounds—for instance, some recent groups of African refugees—may find it particularly difficult to engage with schools.

Immigrant parents know that they are often viewed negatively.

Administrators and teachers are unlikely to speak the languages of LEP parents, and are too often unprepared to work with immigrant communities to bridge cultural and other gaps when communicating with immigrant parents.⁷ These gaps are especially problematic in preK through third grade, when parents in the United States are traditionally the most involved in their children's schools. If immigrant parents do not come to school to volunteer, teachers and administrators often interpret this as a failure to care about their children's education.⁸ Teachers and administrators too often assume that immigrant parents should engage with schools and teachers as other parents do, which can leave immigrant parents feeling isolated and unqualified to advocate for the needs of their children. Moreover, immigrant parents know that they are often viewed negatively.⁹ Teachers and administrators mistakenly assume that because certain parents are not fluent in English or do not understand the U.S. school system, they have nothing to offer the school community or their children's education. Immigrant parents may also find themselves subject to discriminatory comments from teachers or other parents.

C. *The Role of Local Contexts and Attitudes*

The local context of reception—whether welcoming, hostile, or neutral toward immigrants—may have a particularly strong effect on the level and types of discrimination children face in schools and in society. Negative contexts of reception may result in low mobility rates for many children of immigrants across ethnic and linguistic lines.¹⁰ Immigrant parents—particularly those who feel unwelcome and lack financial and social capital to navigate new educational, health, housing, and political institutions—have limited options. This makes it difficult for parents to make educational decisions based on what they truly believe is best for their children.¹¹ In early education, for instance, immigrant parents often choose immersed English instruction for their children, even at the risk of harming primary-language facility. In

5 Maki Park and Margie McHugh, *Immigrant Parents and Early Childhood Programs: Addressing Barriers of Literacy, Culture, and Systems Knowledge* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2014), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrant-parents-early-childhood-programs-barriers.

6 Monica Whatley and Jeanne Batalova, "Limited English Proficient Population of the United States," *Migration Information Source*, July 25, 2013, www.migrationpolicy.org/article/limited-english-proficient-population-united-states.

7 Mariana Souto-Manning and Kevin J. Swick, "Teachers' Beliefs about Parent and Family Involvement: Rethinking our Family Involvement Paradigm," *Early Childhood Education Journal* 34, no. 2 (2006): 187–93.

8 Mari Riojas-Cortez and Belinda Bustos Flores, "Sin olvidar a los padres: Families Collaborating within School and University Partnerships," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 8, no. 3 (2009): 231–39.

9 Joseph Tobin, Angela E. Arzubigi, and Jennifer K. Adair, *Children Crossing Borders* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014).

10 Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*; Eugene E. García and Danielle M. Gonzales, "Pre-K and Latinos: The Foundation for America's Future," Pre-K Now Research Series (Washington, DC: Pew Trusts, 2006), www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/0001/01/01/prek-and-latinos; Stacey J. Lee, *Up against Whiteness: Race, School, and Immigrant Youth* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 2005); Min Zhou, "Segmented Assimilation and Socio-economic Integration of Chinese Immigrant Children in the USA," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 7 (2014): 1172–83.

11 Tobin, Arzubigi, and Adair, *Children Crossing Borders*, 40–41.



negative climates of reception, immigrant parents may hesitate to argue against policies in which they do not believe. Teachers and administrators may mistake compliance with true agreement. Discriminatory policies such as English-only laws can limit the options available to parents and complicate their ability to advocate for the best educational programming for their children.

III. Types of Discrimination Experienced

This report distinguishes two types of discrimination: (1) personal, as experienced in interactions with individuals, and (2) structural, as shaped by institutional practices. Discrimination against young children of immigrants can range from personal slights to more subtle structural disadvantages. Children may be ignored, mistreated, or singled out for aggressive punishment—all easily recognizable by them. But children and parents may not identify these behaviors as discrimination—at least at first. They may also fail to notice structural discrimination—for example, in curricula, home-language policies, and resource distribution across schools—for a time. Yet several studies provide evidence that, over time, the negative messages conveyed by structural types of discrimination may affect the way children see themselves as learners and members of society.¹² Both structural and personal types of discrimination can also negatively affect the way children regard their parents and community.¹³

Examples of both personal and structural forms of discrimination are offered below.

A. Personal Forms of Discrimination

I. Negative Interactions at School

Young children of immigrants may experience discrimination in their interactions with peers and adults at school. Discrimination may be direct (for example, comments that are explicitly racist or otherwise draw attention to their personal appearance) or indirect (for instance, questions about why their parents don't speak English or requests to play the role of a janitor or cleaner instead of a princess or policeman in a make-believe game).

Young children often cope with hurtful comments by singling out certain aspects of their appearance or personality for self-criticism.¹⁴ They may, for example, overhear teachers and staff criticizing immigrant parents or expressing low expectations of immigrant students. Children may hear comments about their accent or home language, or references to television shows that negatively portray someone who looks like them. They may watch as a parent is repeatedly ignored in the school office or struggles to understand forms provided only in English. And they may notice the absence of dolls, pictures, media, or other representations that look like them.

Too often, teachers are impatient with young children who cannot fully express themselves in English or who need extra time to translate experience or words in their mind before answering.¹⁵ As Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco argue, teachers' attitudes toward and interactions with children

12 Martínez, "Reading the World in Spanglish," Carola Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova, *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Alejandro Portes and Lingxin Hao, "The Schooling of Children of Immigrants: Contextual Effects on the Educational Attainment of the Second Generation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 101, no. 33 (2004): 11920–27.

13 Angela E. Arzubiaga, Silvia C. Noguerón, and Amanda L. Sullivan, "The Education of Children in Im/migrant Families," *Review of Research in Education* 33, no.1 (2009): 246–71.

14 Celia Genishi and Anne Haas Dyson, *Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009).

15 Jennifer Keys Adair and Alejandra Barraza, "Voices of Immigrant Parents in Preschool Settings," *Young Children* 69, no. 4 (2014): 32–39; Bogum Yoon, "Uninvited Guests: The Influence of Teachers' Roles and Pedagogies on the Positioning of English Language Learners in the Regular Classroom," *American Educational Research Journal* 45, no. 2 (2008): 495–522.



of immigrants affect these students' success in school.¹⁶ Young children of color from immigrant families are often disciplined more harshly than their white peers with U.S.-born parents. They are suspended in disproportionate numbers compared with their white peers—a trend that starts from the time they are 4 years old.¹⁷ While discriminatory discipline affects children with U.S.-born parents, research suggests that children of immigrants who are also poor and non-white are even more likely to experience discriminatory disciplining.¹⁸

2. Narrow Learning Experiences

Children in low-income communities, including children of immigrants, often experience narrower learning opportunities than their higher-income peers. Schools serving low-income communities typically face resource constraints and provide stricter, less positive educational environments.¹⁹ Narrow learning experiences can include children being asked to sit down for developmentally inappropriate lengths of time and told to repeat words and phrases along with the teacher instead of being offered a variety of oral, verbal, and written literacy tools. For example, students learning about the human body may be asked to cut out paper shapes of skeleton bones and to paste them on a worksheet as a stand-alone activity; a broader approach would be to provide students an inquiry-driven project that lasts several days and includes multiple materials—and draws on ideas and answers from the student themselves. Too often, the early learning experiences of immigrants' children are dictated by whether or not they result in satisfactory test scores rather than by students' talents or interests. The emphasis on test scores typically begins in third grade.²⁰

Children in low-income communities...often experience narrower learning opportunities than their higher-income peers.

The inadequate resources and stricter environments of the public schools most likely to be serving immigrant communities represent a form of structural discrimination. The typical school in a high-poverty and/or majority-minority community is underperforming and thus under stringent oversight, usually accompanied by strict schedules for what subjects should be covered and when. These strict schedules limit teachers' flexibility to respond to the stories, concerns, and ideas of their students. The children of Latino immigrants, for example, often attend elementary schools where instruction centers on preparation for standardized tests. The pressure of focusing on test preparation leads teachers to abandon early childhood pedagogical strategies that would engage children's social, emotional, physical, cultural, intellectual, and social development. As a result, young children of immigrants are more likely than their peers to be in programs focused on test scores rather than higher-level thinking skills, and they are more likely to receive commands and tasks, rather than prompts for exploration and discovery.²¹ When children of immigrants make the transition from public preK to kindergarten, their classroom environments often become less focused on social development, child-centered instruction, problem-solving skills, decision-

16 Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning a New Land*; Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

17 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, "Data Snapshot: School Discipline" (Issue Brief No. 1, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, March 2014), www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf.

18 U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, "Data Snapshot;" Robert Crosnoe, *Mexican Roots, American Schools: Helping Mexican Immigrant Children Succeed* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

19 Genishi and Dyson, *Children, Language, and Literacy*; Bruce Fuller, *Standardized Childhood: The Political and Cultural Struggle over Early Education* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Patricia C. Gándara and Frances Contreras, *The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Yoon, "Uninvited Guests."

20 Marilou Hyson, *Enthusiastic and Engaged Learners: Learning Behaviors in the Early Childhood Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

21 Fuller, *Standardized Childhood*; García and Gonzales, "Pre-K and Latinos;" Crosnoe, *Mexican Roots, American Schools*.



making skills, creative expression, and autonomy.²² While higher-income and U.S.-born parents often advocate for more creative curricula or offer assistance with field trips or project ideas, many low-income immigrant parents are not in a position to do so.

Even when young children have positive learning experiences in public preK programs, there is growing concern that these experiences are narrowed during the early elementary grades. Children of immigrants may be segregated from their peers during the early grades as a result of language tracking, and such tracking instruction can further narrow their learning experiences.²³ María Pabón López and Gerardo R. López find that young children of immigrants are often tracked into English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms led by teachers or paraprofessionals who are not adequately qualified and who are consequently unable to provide the assessment and high-quality content instruction that meets the linguistic needs of their students.²⁴ Those children of immigrants who are learning a new language may be offered only strict versions of literacy instruction rather than rich, engaging learning experiences.

3. Low Intellectual Expectations

Narrower learning experiences are often accompanied by low intellectual expectations.²⁵ This deficit view begins early in schooling. Children of immigrants may arrive at school with strong pre-academic, social, and behavioral skills that fade as they proceed through the early grades.²⁶ Robert Crosnoe finds that children of Latino immigrants enter kindergarten with social skills and emotional health equal to children with U.S.-born parents, but their academic performance soon declines, diverging from their peers'. Notably, this decline happens faster for U.S.-born children of immigrants than for first-generation immigrants entering kindergarten.²⁷

The children of immigrants often enter school with perceived deficits such as they don't know English, or aren't ready for school. Perceptions of deficits can prompt discriminatory practices that reflect low expectations of children's cognitive sophistication or potential.²⁸ Children affected by these perceptions learn they are not meant to excel and are not ready for the same kinds of intellectual stimulation as their peers. For example, in a study of sixth graders, Ramón Antonio Martínez found that when children of immigrants attend schools in which strong English-only and anti-immigrant sentiments are embedded, they can internalize messages that their skills and intelligence are not as good as those of their peers.²⁹ Martínez points out, for example, that instead of seeing an ability to switch between Spanish and English as evidence of creativity, skill, and intelligence, the students in his study attributed their code switching to a lack of proficiency in one or both languages. This "deficit" viewpoint prevents students from seeing themselves as requiring or capable of handling sophisticated learning experiences.

4. Devaluation of Home Languages

Many early childhood educators, administrators, and policymakers see bilingualism or a fluency in languages other than English as problematic.³⁰ Debates over the literacy skills of children of immigrants "are imbued with discourses of difference and deficit views that undergird interventions for students 'at

22 Gándara and Contreras, *The Latino Education Crisis*; Yoon, "Uninvited Guests."

23 Robert Crosnoe, "Double Disadvantage or Signs of Resilience? The Elementary School Contexts of Children from Mexican Immigrant Families," *American Educational Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2005): 269–303.

24 María Pabón López and Gerardo R. López, *Persistent Inequality: Contemporary Realities in the Education of Undocumented Latino/a Students* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

25 Celia Genishi, "Young English Language Learners: Resourceful in the Classroom—Research in Review," *Young Children* 57, no. 4 (2002): 66–72; Lourdes Diaz Soto, "Young Bilingual Children's Perceptions of Bilingualism and Biliteracy: Altruistic Possibilities," *Bilingual Research Journal* 26, no. 3 (2002): 599–610.

26 Patricia Gándara, *Fragile Futures: Risk and Vulnerability among Latino High Achievers* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Services, 2005), 18; Patricia Gándara and Megan Hopkins, *Forbidden Language: English Learners and Restrictive Language Policies*, Multicultural Education Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

27 Crosnoe, *Mexican Roots, American Schools*.

28 Arzubíaga, Noguerón, and Sullivan, "The Education of Children in Im/migrant Families."

29 Martínez, "Reading the World in Spanglish."

30 Gándara and Hopkins, *Forbidden Language*.



risk.”³¹ These views drive varying approaches to remedying students’ literacy skills, including “fixing” individual students and their home literacy practices to help ensure their success in school. As in the example above, the ability to move between Spanish and English is considered an obstacle rather than a skill.

Deficit views make it difficult for educators to build on children’s understanding of multiple logic, language, and literacy systems. Instead, educators with these views seek to acculturate children away from strong ethnic and cultural identities.³² Early childhood educators’ drive to “fix” children too often sends the message that what these children’s families and communities have offered them so far is not good enough. This message may come through, for example, in an everyday vocabulary correction: hearing a child use the word *chanclas* (“sandals” in English), a teacher may say, “Do you mean *sandals*?” or “In our classroom we say *sandals*” or may just repeat what the child said but substitute *sandals* for *chanclas*.³³ Instead, the teacher could use the same word as the child. Or he could take an additive approach and let the children know that they can use the word *chanclas* as well as *sandals*. He could take the use of *chanclas* as a teaching opportunity and use picture books with sandals to get children talking about how different words can convey similar meanings. How teachers and other adults respond to children’s use of languages other than English—embodied by the use of English versus other languages on classroom walls, in books, in songs, and computers—sends a message to children about the value of their home languages.³⁴ The alienation from families and communities that follows can be detrimental to learning. Min Zhou, for example, finds that connections with their ethnic community were particularly important for children of Chinese immigrants, giving them the resources and understanding to be academically successful.³⁵

Early childhood educators’ drive to “fix” children too often sends the message that what these children’s families and communities have offered them so far is not good enough.

B. Structural Forms of Discrimination

I. Segregation

Children of immigrants who are learning English are often segregated from their English-speaking peers.³⁶ A landmark study points out that children of immigrants often experience “triple segregation”—by income, race/ethnicity, and language.³⁷ Children struggle academically and socially under multiple layers of segregation, when their race/ethnicity, home language, and socioeconomic status may all trigger discrimination. Such multilayered segregation begins early. In Texas, for example, 24 percent of elementary schools serve primarily Latino, economically disadvantaged, and English Language Learner (ELL) students.³⁸

31 Kris D. Gutiérrez, Zitlali Morales, and Danny C. Martinez, “Re-mediating Literacy: Culture, Difference, and Learning for Students from Nondominant Communities,” *Review of Research in Education* 33, no. 1 (2009): 212–45.

32 Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant America*; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration*.

33 Jennifer Keys Adair, “Confirming *Chanclas*: What Early Childhood Teacher Educators Can Learn from Immigrant Preschool Teachers and Their Critique of Language ‘Modeling’ Techniques,” *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 32, no. 1 (2011): 55–71.

34 Genishi and Dyson, *Children, Language, and Literacy*.

35 Zhou, “Segmented Assimilation and Socio-Economic Integration.”

36 Patricia Gándara, Russell Rumberger, Julie Maxwell-Jolly, and Rebecca Callahan, “English Learners in California Schools: Unequal Resources, Unequal Outcomes,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 11, no. 36 (2003): 1–54.

37 Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning a New Land*.

38 Julian Vasquez Heilig and Jennifer Jellison Holme, “Nearly 50 Years Post-Jim Crow: Persisting and Expansive School Segregation for African American, Latina/o, and ELL Students in Texas,” *Education and Urban Society* 45, no. 5 (2013): 609–32.



Many children of immigrants who are learning English attend early childhood programs and elementary grades in low-income schools with high immigrant concentrations. Nearly 70 percent of young children learning English at school are enrolled in only 10 percent of the nation's elementary schools.³⁹ This high concentration implies limited interaction with native-English-speaking peers.⁴⁰

2. Lack of High-Quality Resources and Bilingual Programs

Lawsuits over the past decade in states such as California⁴¹ and Arizona⁴² demonstrate that children of immigrants and/or ELLs often do not receive the same quality of education as their native-English-speaking peers with U.S.-born parents. A 2003 class-action suit on behalf of poor children in California, highlighted the state's use of inferior facilities and curricula, and poorly designed assessment instruments to teach ELL children.⁴³ Studies of children of Latino immigrants have found they are more likely to attend elementary schools in high-poverty areas that struggle with less-experienced and less-skilled teachers, fewer resources, and lower-than-average academic outcomes than their white, U.S.-born peers.⁴⁴

Limited resources and overcrowded classrooms are often accompanied by limited use of instructional technology and advanced teaching strategies.⁴⁵ Bruce Fuller and Cynthia García Coll point out that "the scarcity of high-quality preschools is most severe within low-income Latino communities."⁴⁶ When children of immigrants attend low-income schools, they are likely to have uncertified teachers or those with temporary certificates; their teachers often cannot speak these students' home language, particularly if that language is less common than Spanish or Chinese.⁴⁷

Very few children from uncommon language backgrounds attend schools staffed by teachers speaking their languages. For example, a study of immigrant families in California found that 72 percent of Asian American families speak a language other than English at home.⁴⁸ Among immigrant families speaking Hmong, Nepali, Vietnamese, Taiwanese Hokkien, or Bengali, 91 percent speak their native language at home. Young children growing up in these homes attended school with almost no chance of a high-quality bilingual program: only 5 percent of bilingual teachers and 7 percent of teaching assistants in California spoke an Asian or Pacific Island language during the 2009-10 school year. Moreover, there were only five Vietnamese-speaking bilingual teachers in California for 36,555 students, 58 percent of whom were in the early elementary grades.⁴⁹

39 Clemencia Cosentino de Cohen and Beatriz Chu Clewell, "Putting English Language Learners on the Educational Map" (policy brief, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, May 2007), www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/311468_ell.pdf.

40 Eugene García and Delis Cuellar, "Who are these Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Students?" *The Teachers College Record* 108, no. 11 (2006): 2220-46.

41 Patricia Gándara, Rachel Moran, and Eugene García, "Legacy of Brown: Lau and Language Policy in the United States," *Review of Research in Education* 28 (2004): 27-46; Russell Rumberger and Patricia Gándara, "Seeking Equity in the Education of California's English Learners," *The Teachers College Record* 106, no. 10 (2004): 2032-56.

42 Wayne E. Wright, "Heritage Language Programs in the Era of English-Only and No Child Left Behind," *Heritage Language Journal* 5, no. 1 (2007): 1-26; Eugene E. García, Kerry Lawton, and Eduardo H. Diniz de Figueiredo, *Assessment of Young English Language Learners in Arizona: Questioning the Validity of the State Measure of English Proficiency* (Los Angeles: Civil Rights Project, UCLA, 2010), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6xx644b5>.

43 Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, and Callahan, "English Learners in California Schools."

44 García and Gonzales, "Pre-K and Latinos;" Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning a New Land*.

45 Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, "Educating Latino Immigrant Students in the Twenty-First Century: Principles for the Obama Administration," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 2 (2009): 327-40; Fuller, *Standardized Childhood*; Susanna Loeb, Margaret Bridges, Daphna Bassok, Bruce Fuller, and Russ Rumberger, "How Much Is Too Much? The Influence of Preschool Centers on Children's Social and Cognitive Development," *Economics of Education Review* 26, no. 1 (2007): 52-66.

46 Bruce Fuller and Cynthia García Coll, "Learning from Latinos: Contexts, Families, and Child Development in Motion," *Developmental Psychology* 46, no. 3 (2010): 559.

47 De Cohen and Clewell, *Putting English Language Learners on the Educational Map*; García and Gonzales, "Pre-K and Latinos."

48 Asian American Center for Advancing Justice, "A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders in California, 2013," accessed October 15, 2014, 19, www.advancingjustice.org/sites/default/files/Communities_of_Contrast_California_2013.pdf.

49 California Department of Education, "Number of English Language Learners by Language: 2009-2010," accessed October 15, 2014, <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/LEPbyLang1.asp?cChoice=LEPbyLang1&cYear=2009-10&cLevel=State&cTopic=LC&mTimeFrame=S&submit1=Submit>.



The lack of bilingual or dual-language educational programs for young children arguably discriminates against those who grow up speaking a language other than English at home.⁵⁰ And the bilingual opportunities offered in many preK classrooms quickly diminish in kindergarten.⁵¹ This is sometimes the result of state policies that make English-only classrooms mandatory for children in K-12 grades (as in Arizona).

3. Low Teacher/School Engagement with Parents

Immigrant families are rarely influential in shaping how their children are treated, taught, and valued within U.S. schools.⁵² Typically, early learning environments feature a high level of parent involvement and parent-teacher interactions as parents learn about the schooling process and closely monitor their children's social and academic progress. Yet, as described earlier, immigrant parents do not feel as welcome in early learning contexts as do U.S.-born parents, and immigrant parents are thus less likely to participate in their children's schooling.⁵³ Immigrant parents may also have fewer opportunities for engagement because of common obstacles such as working hours, transportation and child care. Even with such obstacles many immigrant parents are eager to support their children's education and often find creative ways to motivate their children to do well in school.⁵⁴

Immigrant families are rarely influential in shaping how their children are treated, taught, and valued within U.S. schools.

There is significant evidence that immigrant parents' care and concern for education—and the early education of their young children in particular—goes unnoticed by schools and teachers.⁵⁵ Teachers often struggle to communicate and engage with immigrant parents.⁵⁶ Teachers expect parents to approach them to discuss issues relevant to their children, and yet many immigrant parents either feel intimidated or feel that it is inappropriate to approach their children's teachers. A teacher's expectation that parents will initiate dialogue is not, in itself, necessarily discriminatory. However, when immigrant parents are systemically less connected to their children's education than are native-born parents, it is important for teachers and early childhood directors to consider whether discrimination, even if subtle, may be part of the problem. Those parents who understand the often unspoken rules of school and teachers' perceptions of optimal parent-teacher engagement enjoy privileges not shared by other parents—including immigrant

50 Linda M. Espinosa, *Early Education for Dual Language Learners: Promoting School Readiness and Early School Success* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2013), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/early-education-dual-language-learners-promoting-school-readiness-and-early-school-success; Eugene E. García, *Teaching and Learning in Two Languages: Bilingualism and Schooling in the United States* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005); Gándara and Hopkins, *Forbidden Language*.

51 Ana Christina DaSilva Iddings, Mary Carol Combs, and Luis Moll, "In the Arid Zone: Drying Out Educational Resources for English Language Learners Through Policy and Practice," *Urban Education* 47, no. 2 (2012): 495–514.

52 Angela E. Arzubiaga and Jennifer Adair, "Misrepresentations of Language and Culture, Language and Culture as Proxies for Marginalization: Debunking the Arguments," in *Handbook of Latinos and Education*, eds. Enrique G. Murillo Jr., Sofia A. Villenas, Ruth Trinidad Galván, Juan Sánchez Muñoz, Corinne Martínez, and Margarita Machado-Casas (New York: Routledge, 2010), 301–38; Yvonne De Gaetano, "The Role of Culture in Engaging Latino Parents' Involvement in School," *Urban Education* 42, no. 2 (2007): 145–62.

53 Concha Delgado-Gaitan, *Involving Latino Families in Schools: Raising Students Achievement through Home-School Partnerships* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004); Edward M. Olivos, Oscar Jimenez-Castellanos, and Alberto M. Ochoa, *Bicultural Parent Engagement: Advocacy and Empowerment* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).

54 Marie-Anne Suizzo, Erin Pahlke, Lisa Yarnell, Kuan-Yi Chen, and Sylvia Romero, "Home-Based Parental Involvement in Young Children's Learning Across U.S. Ethnic Groups: Cultural Models of Academic Socialization," *Journal of Family Issues* 35, no. 2 (2014): 254–287.

55 Gerardo R. López, "The Value of Hard Work: Lessons on Parent Involvement from an (Im) Migrant Household," *Harvard Educational Review* 71, no. 3 (2001): 416–38; Marianne Whitehouse and Carolyn Colvin, "Reading Families: Deficit Discourse and Family Literacy," *Theory Into Practice* 40, no. 3 (2001): 212–19; Souto-Manning and Swick, "Teachers' Beliefs about Parent and Family Involvement."

56 Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair, *Children Crossing Borders*; Riojas-Cortez and Flores, "Sin olvidar a los padres."



parents—who are unable to advocate effectively for their children.⁵⁷

4. Misdiagnoses of Special Education Needs

The process of acquiring a second language is often misinterpreted as an impediment to learning, even when children exhibit strong skills in domains other than the English language.⁵⁸ ELLs are often misdiagnosed for special education classes. As a result, they may be overenrolled in these classes and disproportionately categorized or diagnosed with a learning disability.⁵⁹ On the other hand, some ELLs are not properly diagnosed when they do have a learning disability.

Learning a new language is not an easy task. Unfortunately, the process is little understood by many teachers, administrators, and standardized-test designers.⁶⁰ Tests for language proficiency have been found to show biases against children learning a new language.⁶¹ Because tests for language proficiency are only given to children suspected of being ELLs, lack of English proficiency is taken to imply a disability, and children of immigrants are at risk of being misdiagnosed with special education needs.⁶² When misdiagnosed and placed in special education classrooms, children of immigrants consequently miss rigorous or grade-level-appropriate learning experiences.⁶³ Those who are not properly diagnosed with disabilities, on the other hand, may be placed in mainstream classes which are not appropriate for them.

IV. Reasons for Discrimination in the Early School Years

Discrimination begins in the early school years, as the young children of immigrants come into close contact with institutions, groups, and individuals who may be biased against them or their communities. Discrimination is driven by both structural forces and personal attitudes. Often, structural and personal discrimination reinforce one another, as people borrow their ideas about immigrants from the media, policymakers, advertisements, and public discourse. Thus, the work of teachers and administrators at the school level is connected to larger discourses around immigration, poverty, and cultural diversity. Studies regularly demonstrate that loving adults who value young children's identities, families, and culture foster resilience in children.⁶⁴ When early schooling environments do not value the worlds of young children, discrimination persists. Following are five common source of discrimination experienced at very start of a child's educational journey.

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- 57 Concha Delgado-Gaitan, "Involving Parents in the Schools: A Process of Empowerment," *American Journal of Education* 100, no. 1 (1991): 20–46; Jennifer Keys Adair and Joseph Tobin, "Listening to the Voices of Immigrant Parents," in *Diversities in Early Childhood Education: Rethinking and Doing*, eds. Celia Genishi and Lin Goodwin (New York: Routledge, 2008), 137–50.
- 58 Alfredo J. Artiles and Alba A. Ortiz, "English Language Learners with Special Education Needs: Contexts and Possibilities," in *English Language Learners with Special Education Needs: Identification, Assessment, and Instruction*, eds. Alfredo J. Artiles and Alba A. Ortiz (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2002), 3–27.
- 59 Amanda L. Sullivan, "Disproportionality in Special Education Identification and Placement of English Language Learners," *Exceptional Children* 77, no. 3 (2011): 317–34; Dara Shifrer, Chandra Muller, and Rebecca Callahan, "Disproportionality and Learning Disabilities: Parsing Apart Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Language," *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 44, no. 3 (2011): 246–57.
- 60 Alfredo J. Artiles, Janette K. Klingner, Amanda Sullivan, and Edward G. Fierros, "Shifting Landscapes of Professional Practices: English Learner Special Education Placement in English-only States," in *Forbidden Language: English Learners and Restrictive Language Policies*, eds. Patricia Gándara and Megan Hopkins (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 102–17.
- 61 Jamal Abedi and Patricia Gándara, "Performance of English Language Learners as a Subgroup in Large-Scale Assessment: Interaction of Research and Policy," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice* 25, no. 4 (2006): 36–46.
- 62 Beth Harry and Janette K. Klingner, *Why Are So Many Minority Students in Special Education? Understanding Race and Disability in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014); Jeff MacSwan and Kellie Rolstad, "How Language Proficiency Tests Mislead us About Ability: Implications for English Language Learner Placement in Special Education," *The Teachers College Record* 108, no. 11 (2006): 2304–28.
- 63 Artiles, Klingner, Sullivan, and Fierros, "Shifting Landscapes of Professional Practices."
- 64 Kendal Holtrop, Kendal, McNeil Smith, and Jenna C. Scott, "Associations between Positive Parenting Practices and Child Externalizing Behavior in Underserved Latino Immigrant Families," *Family Process* 54, no. 2 (2014): 359–375; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning a New Land*.



A. Lack of Meaningful Connections with Immigrant Communities

Parent engagement and participation are key elements of high-quality early learning environments. The absence of connection, communication, and exchange of ideas between educators and immigrant parents can be harmful, especially in the early years of a child's schooling. Teachers and support staff make important decisions about the young children of immigrants, but often do so without having strong relationships with these children's parents or broader community. Research demonstrates that most teachers have little contact with the immigrant communities where they teach. This is one reason for the unbridged gap between how teachers and immigrant parents conceptualize the task of educating and caring for children.⁶⁵

In research conducted for the book *Children Crossing Borders* (coauthored by the writer of this report), 150 immigrant parents and 50 preschool teachers in Arizona, Iowa, New York, and Tennessee were asked about parent-teacher communication.⁶⁶ The parents did not necessarily agree with teachers' viewpoints on curricula, pedagogy, or the best ways to support language and cultural identities. Most, however, said that teachers did not communicate well with them.

*Parent engagement and participation are key elements
of high-quality early learning environments.*

Teachers in cities and towns newly exposed to immigration struggled particularly hard to work collaboratively with immigrant parents. Sudanese parents in Iowa City, for example, had little understanding of what happens to their children at school. Mexican and Chinese parents in Nashville reported little communication with teachers. In cities with long histories of immigration, meanwhile, problems persisted. Mixtec parents—those speaking indigenous Latin American languages—struggled to communicate with the Spanish-speaking teachers at schools in Phoenix and New York City. Bosnian parents in Phoenix did not feel comfortable discussing curriculum issues such as what kinds of books or topics are covered in class with teachers. Nigerian and Dominican parents in New York City believed their opinions were being ignored by school staff. The teachers participating in the study did not express any open hostility toward immigrant families, yet their perspectives on immigrant families were often misguided, naïve, or detrimental to building ties with parents.⁶⁷ An exception to this trend occurred when teachers were strongly connected to or came from the same immigrant communities as the parents.

B. Focus on Immigrant Families' Deficits Rather than Assets

Lacking relationships that allow them to learn about the lives of immigrants, teachers often form negative assumptions about the family home lives of their students. These assumptions begin in the early grades, before young children have the vocabulary or understanding to explain, defend, or advocate for themselves.⁶⁸ Such preconceived notions make it difficult for teachers and staff to understand the concerns, questions, and desires of immigrant parents.⁶⁹ Balanced relationships are almost impossible to create

65 Sally Brown and Mariana Souto-Manning, "'Culture Is the Way They Live Here': Young Latin@s and Parents Navigate Linguistic and Cultural Borderlands in US Schools," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 7, no. 1 (2007): 25–42.

66 Tobin, Arzubiaga, and Adair, *Children Crossing Borders*.

67 Jennifer Keys Adair, "Examining Whiteness as an Obstacle to Positively Approaching Immigrant Families in US Early Childhood Educational Settings," *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 17, no. 5 (2014): 643–66.

68 Celia Genishi and Anne Haas Dyson, *Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times*.

69 Richard R. Valencia, ed., *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Linda van den Bergh, Eddie Denessen, Lisette Hornstra, Marinus Voeten, and Rob W. Holland, "The Implicit Prejudiced Attitudes of Teachers: Relations to Teacher Expectations and the Ethnic Achievement Gap," *American Educational Research Journal* 47, no. 2 (June 2010): 497–527; Ana Celia Zentella, "José Can You See': Latin@ Responses to Racist Discourse," in *Bilingual Aesthetics*, ed. Doris Sommer (New York: Palgrave Press, 2003), 51–66.



when teachers hold negative assumptions about immigrant families.⁷⁰ Deficit views about immigrants—coupled with current immigration policies—prevent parents, teachers, and educational professionals from acting in the best interests of children.⁷¹ For example, negative assumptions about young children’s families and cultural backgrounds can lead teachers to discourage children from expressing ethnic or cultural identities, and to overlook ways to make curricular and pedagogical connections to children’s home lives.⁷²

Balanced relationships are almost impossible to create when teachers hold negative assumptions about immigrant families.

In an analysis of more than 50 preschool teachers working with immigrant families in multiple communities, teachers in places new to immigration voiced problematic assumptions about immigrant families. For example in a Nashville preschool site, a teacher blamed an Asian immigrant mother for frustrating her work in the classroom, implying that the immigrant mother’s way of handling a matter concerning her child was not only different, but inferior. When asked to speak about the Asian families in their classrooms, several teachers did not know where the families were from and complained that they could not communicate with the mothers, who were “last in line to learn English,” behind their husbands.⁷³

Conversely, when educators do not hold negative assumptions about immigrants’ children, they may attempt to be “colorblind”—an approach criticized by immigration and education scholars alike.⁷⁴ A belief that all people are the same can deter educators from making extra efforts to get to know immigrant families, or to bring up figures and topics that are culturally important to immigrants’ children, such as cultural heroes, historical figures of color, and differing viewpoints of history.⁷⁵ A colorblind approach may also deter teachers from responding to children’s concerns surrounding their migration experiences, integration in the United States, and encounters with racism and discrimination.⁷⁶

C. Inadequate Teacher Preparation and Recruitment

Teacher-preparation programs that may qualify educators to provide young children of immigrants with a sophisticated range of learning experiences are difficult to find. Many state elementary certification programs have done away with early childhood specializations, and very few states offer an early childhood specialization that may be completed alongside bilingual certification.⁷⁷ Teachers’ resulting lack of preparation can be detrimental for young learners. In a study of first through fourth grade teachers working with ELLs, researchers found that those with bilingual certification were more supportive of and positive

70 Sofia Villenas, “Latina Mothers and Small-Town Racisms: Creating Narratives of Dignity and Moral Education in North Carolina,” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2001): 3–28.

71 Adair, “Examining Whiteness as an Obstacle.”

72 Norma González, Luis C. Moll, and Cathy Amanti, eds., *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

73 Adair, “Examining Whiteness as an Obstacle.”

74 Lin A. Goodwin, “Teacher Preparation and the Education of Immigrant Children,” *Education and Urban Society* 34, no. 2 (2002): 156–172; Sherry Marx and Larry L. Larson, “Taking Off the Color-Blind Glasses: Recognizing and Supporting Latina/o Students in a Predominantly White School,” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2012): 259–303.

75 Fabienne Doucet and Jennifer Keys Adair, “Addressing Race and Inequity in the Classroom,” *Young Children—Research in Review Section* 68, no. 5 (2013): 88–97.

76 Gloria Swindler Boutte, Julia Lopez-Robertson, and Elizabeth Powers-Costello, “Moving Beyond Colorblindness in Early Childhood Classrooms,” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 39, no. 5 (2011): 335–42.

77 Eugene M. García, M. Beatriz Arias, Nancy J. Harris Murri, and Carolina Serna, “Developing Responsive Teachers: A Challenge for a Demographic Reality,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 61, no. 1–2 (2010): 132–42; Kip Téllez and Hersh C. Waxman, eds., *Preparing Quality Educators for English Language Learners: Research, Policy, and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2005).



about their students than teachers with ESL or no language instruction certification.⁷⁸ The lack of proper teacher-preparation programs leaves teachers with few opportunities to learn how to offer higher-quality early childhood experiences to young children of immigrants.

There are also too few bilingual teachers entering the field, and even fewer being positioned as mentors to new teachers.⁷⁹ Those professionals who are most closely connected to the immigrant experience, and who may be bilingual, are not entering the teaching profession. Instead, the demographics of teachers in the United States remain dominantly white, native born, and monolingual.⁸⁰

There are...too few bilingual teachers entering the field, and even fewer being positioned as mentors to new teachers.

D. Testing Pressures in the Early Grades

When Head Start, Migrant Head Start, and Early Head Start began as interventions that included children of immigrants, high-stakes testing was not part of the early educational landscape.⁸¹ Until recently, the field of early childhood education considered itself immune from the narrowing curricular and pedagogical influences of standardized testing. Early childhood education scholars, teachers, and administrators are now wrestling with newly required standards for preK and kindergarten that often necessitate (1) pedagogical and content alignment with higher elementary grades and (2) a strong directive to make sure children are prepared for third-grade standardized assessments. Early childhood scholars throughout the social sciences are now warning that such a shift from multidimensional learning to single-indicator systems (reliant on markers such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills [DIBELS]⁸² scores and math benchmarks) will narrow the possibilities and potential of young children, particularly those already in marginalized school settings.⁸³ Instead of developing a range of capabilities that includes social, emotional, and academic skills, young children are directed to give short, often yes or no answers on tests and worksheets without having to use collaboration, creativity, or ingenuity to complete school lessons.

Testing pressures have dramatically affected ELLs, who are more likely to be pulled out of the regular classroom into ESL programs that tend to be formulaic in nature.⁸⁴ As discussed in this report, ELLs are rarely valued for the bilingual knowledge and skills they are developing.⁸⁵ Responding to fears that children of immigrants will not pass language proficiency exams, early childhood teachers in particular have been shown to change their practices: they use more worksheets and timed practice exams, while offering fewer dynamic, hands-on learning experiences.⁸⁶ Although testing pressures affect most young children in

78 Ana G. García-Nevarez, Mary E. Stafford, and Beatriz Arias, "Arizona Elementary Teachers' Attitudes toward English Language Learners and the Use of Spanish in Classroom Instruction," *Bilingual Research Journal* 29, no. 2 (2005): 295–317.

79 Karen Sakash and Flora Rodriguez-Brown, "Fostering Collaboration between Mainstream and Bilingual Teachers and Teacher Candidates," in *Teacher Preparation for Linguistically Diverse Classrooms*, ed. T. Lucas (New York: Routledge, 2010), 143–59; Glenda M. Flores and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, "The Social Dynamics Channelling Latina College Graduates into the Teaching Profession," *Gender, Work and Organization* 21, no. 6 (2014): 491–515.

80 C. Emily Feistritzer, "Profile of Teachers in the U.S. 2011," National Center for Education Information, www.ncei.com/Profile_Teachers_US_2011.pdf.

81 Edward Zigler and Sally J. Styfco, *The Head Start Debates* (Baltimore: P.H. Brookes Publishing 2004).

82 Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is an increasingly common assessment used in preK-2 grades in the United States.

83 Elizabeth Graue, "Teaching and Learning in a Post-DAP World," *Early Education and Development* 19, no. 3 (2008): 441–47; Lisa S. Goldstein, "Beyond the DAP Versus Standards Dilemma: Examining the Unforgiving Complexity of Kindergarten Teaching in the United States," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2007): 39–54.

84 Patricia Gándara, Julie Maxwell-Jolly, and Anne Driscoll, *Listening to Teachers of English Language Learners: A Survey of California Teachers' Challenges, Experiences, and Professional Development Needs* (Santa Cruz, CA: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2005), www.wested.org/resources/listening-to-teachers-of-english-language-learners-a-survey-of-california-teachers-challenges-experiences-and-professional-development-needs/.

85 Genishi and Dyson, *Children, Language, and Literacy*.

86 Christopher P. Brown, "Pivoting a Prekindergarten Program off the Child or the Standard? A Case Study of Integrating the Practices of Early Childhood Education into Elementary School," *The Elementary School Journal* 110, no. 2 (2009): 202–27.



public schools, the pressures have disproportionately fallen upon those children of immigrants who are in low-income schools or who are labeled as ELLs, or both.⁸⁷

E. Negative Labels and Concerns over School Readiness

The school readiness of children arriving in preK or kindergarten (whether they are on grade level) is most often assessed early in the school year, using states' early learning guidelines supplemented with literacy and math benchmarks.⁸⁸ The requirements for what young children should know and be capable of doing in the areas of reading and math have changed dramatically in the past 15 years—and these changes appear to have pushed teachers to forgo developmentally appropriate practices across a range of subject matter.⁸⁹ Amid assessments' strong focus on reading and writing in English, many children of immigrants arrive in school already categorized as unprepared.

In many cases, young children of immigrants arrive at preschool and kindergarten with capabilities and skills that go unrecognized by teachers and school staff.⁹⁰ Studies of ELLs in early grades have shown that teachers concentrate on assessed factors such as early literacy and math, instead of looking at children from a more holistic perspective.⁹¹ Teachers sometimes refer to students in their classes based on how well they have done on math and literacy benchmarks. Terms such as “low reader” or “struggling” only capture what pupils were able to prove they know on a test taken every eight weeks. This method of referring to children by a test score ignores social, emotional, academic, and cultural strengths they bring to the classroom. Children might be categorized by the words they do not know, the letters and numbers they cannot write, or the language they do not understand. Yet, the same children may be able to move between cultural and linguistic worlds, ask important and complicated questions, and undertake scientific inquiry. They may arrive in school with supportive families and communities and with a secure cultural and/or linguistic identity—strong factors for academic success. These factors are not usually considered or supported by states' early learning guidelines.⁹²

In many cases, young children of immigrants arrive at preschool and kindergarten with capabilities and skills that go unrecognized by teachers and school staff.

V. Recommendations

Amid the discrimination faced by immigrant families in the larger society, schools and early education programs could provide safe and comfortable settings for children of immigrants. Students' early educa-

87 Adair, “Examining Whiteness as an Obstacle,” Gándara, *Fragile Futures*.

88 Christopher P. Brown, “Reforming Preschool to Ready Children for Academic Achievement: A Case Study of the Impact of Pre-K Reform on the Issue of School Readiness,” *Early Education and Development* 24, no. 4 (2013): 554–73.

89 Christopher P. Brown and Yi Chin Lan, “A Qualitative Metasynthesis Comparing U.S. Teachers' Conceptions of School Readiness Prior to and after the Implementation of NCLB,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 45 (2015): 1–13; Audra Parker and Stacey Neuharth-Pritchett, “Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Kindergarten: Factors Shaping Teachers' Belief and Practice,” *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 21, no. 1 (2006): 65–78.

90 Linda M. Espinosa and Eugene García, “Developmental Assessment of Young Dual Language Learners with a Focus on Kindergarten Entry Assessment: Implications for State Policies” (working paper no. 1, Center for Early Care and Education Research, 2012), <http://earlysuccess.org/sites/default/files/KEA%20Policy%20brief.CECER-DLL.12-12.pdf>

91 Guadalupe Valdés, *Learning and Not Learning English: Latino Students in American Schools*, Multicultural Education Series (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001).

92 Sarah Daily, Mary Burkhauser, and Tamara Halle, “A Review of School Readiness Practices in the States: Early Learning Guidelines and Assessments,” *Early Childhood Highlights* 1, no. 3 (2010): 1–12.



tion experiences could validate the perspectives and ideas of their immigrant parents as well as their own knowledge, curiosity, and potential. In interviews conducted for the book *Children Crossing Borders*, immigrant parents from many cultural and ethnic communities described preschool as an oasis from discrimination, and indicated that the classroom environment became less safe and comfortable once children started attending K-12 programs.⁹³ How can the early grades buffer children and their families from the discrimination that they will likely face in society at large?

Schools and early education programs could provide safe and comfortable settings for children of immigrants.

Researchers need to conduct longitudinal studies of how children of immigrants fare in different educational settings, from preK to college. One aim is to better understand the effects of teachers' perceptions of children of immigrants and how these perceptions affect the children's academic trajectories and life outcomes. There is also a need for more research about how children of immigrants view their own educational experiences. It would be helpful to compare research on underperforming schools with in-depth studies of classrooms where young children of immigrants enjoy dynamic learning experiences and support in two or more languages, and where school staff foster strong relationships with immigrant parents.

Despite these gaps, the existing research points to several potential interventions that schools and policymakers could undertake to address the discrimination faced by children of immigrants in the early grades. Some expressions of discrimination—particularly those that are personally experienced by young children—can be addressed by changing attitudes, policies, and behavior at the classroom and school levels. Others require more comprehensive, institutional shifts in how immigrant families are included and valued within early childhood education and throughout the preK-12 system.

Recommendation No. 1: Pursue reciprocal, equalizing relationships with parents and communities. In order to change the assumptions that many nonimmigrant teachers have of immigrant family life and communities, schools need to forge more equitable and reciprocal relationships with parents and communities. Moving away from a deficit or a colorblind viewpoint requires teachers to change how they relate to immigrant families, and to accept differences in their classroom without placing value judgments on those differences. Teachers need more experience in diverse communities, experience that would best include everyday interactions and community events.⁹⁴ Teachers and families alike can benefit from working together to advocate for policy changes. Policymakers and law enforcement officials might use teachers' perspectives as additional evidence that immigration policies affect young children's social, emotional, academic, and cultural development. Sonia Nieto suggests that instead of taking a colorblind approach teachers should (1) "acknowledge the differences that children bring to school" to ensure that these differences are visible to classmates, school staff, and the students themselves; (2) admit "the possibility that students' identities may influence how they experience school and how they learn;" and (3) accept differences by "making provisions for them" and changing pedagogy to incorporate students' lives and strengths.⁹⁵

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), in cooperation with the author and a colleague in the early childhood education field, has produced a professional development guide based on suggestions made by more than 150 immigrant parents.⁹⁶ These parents represent diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds and were interviewed in locales across the United States. The interview

93 Joseph Tobin, Angela E. Arzubiaga, and Jennifer K. Adair, *Children Crossing Borders*.

94 Mariana Souto-Manning, *Multicultural Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom: Approaches, Strategies, and Tools, Preschool-2nd Grade* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013).

95 Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, 2nd edition (White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers, 2004), 146.

96 Joseph Tobin, Angela E. Arzubiaga, and Jennifer K. Adair, *Children Crossing Borders*.



questions focused on how teachers could work more equitably and successfully with these parents and their children.⁹⁷ The resulting guide suggests, among other things, that teachers express affection with children, be patient with children and their parents, show respect to parents, learn and use words from families' home languages, approach parents as experts on their children, learn about incoming students before the school year begins, and welcome parents into the classroom.

Recommendation No. 2: Support rich representations of diverse cultural and ethnic communities. It is important for students in early grade classrooms to have normal, everyday, positive interactions with people from their own and other cultural backgrounds. How teachers speak about racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic differences sends strong messages to young children about who they are. For example, teachers may discuss the value of linguistic differences and emphasize the importance of speaking languages other than English. Using “funds of knowledge” in dramatic play and other early childhood teaching and learning techniques can also support young children’s appreciation of their families’ cultural and linguistic heritage.⁹⁸ Funds of knowledge is a theoretical approach designed to help teachers learn from families and then apply that knowledge to curriculum and pedagogical decisions in the classroom. Teachers are asked to build on families’ funds of knowledge instead of approaching families from a deficit perspective, and to incorporate families’ connections to subject matter such as science and math in everyday classroom lessons.⁹⁹

Classrooms, schools, districts, and federal programs can insist on having teachers and administrators represent cultural and ethnic communities in materials, curricula, lectures, professional development, and policy guidance. Teachers, community leaders, and school administrators can work together to include parents from diverse backgrounds in school decision-making processes. Teachers can work creatively to ask parents about their children, positioning parents as the experts on their children.

Recommendation No. 3: Offer dynamic, sophisticated learning experiences. PreK and the early elementary grades would do well to move away from using standardized testing as the primary basis for curriculum design and measures of academic competence.¹⁰⁰ Children of immigrants excel when they can demonstrate academic skills and knowledge by using examples from home, as demonstrated in funds of knowledge programs,¹⁰¹ play-centered interventions,¹⁰² and rich literacy projects.¹⁰³ Teachers whose pedagogy encompasses critical thinking, multiple perspectives, and diverse approaches to learning build on the ability of young children to bridge cultural worlds, helping them acquire college-relevant skills and knowledge.¹⁰⁴ Cooperative learning—a pedagogical approach that encourages students to work in groups to solve problems, complete projects, and work on assignments—is particularly beneficial for ELL students and those from diverse backgrounds because it invites peer interaction as well as multiple forms of expression and thus helps participants build a wider vocabulary.¹⁰⁵ State and federal early learning policies should not only improve access to early education but also ensure that this education includes engaged, creative, and culturally responsive learning experiences.

Recommendation No. 4: Provide teachers with rigorous training in early childhood pedagogy and encourage their connection to immigrant communities. Having teachers who are bilingual is important, and not just for young children with emerging literacy in more than one language. Bilingual teachers who can communicate with parents in their first language help parents advocate for their children’s education. Bilingual teachers can also provide rich linguistic experiences for all children, regardless

97 Adair and Barraza, “Voices of Immigrant Parents in Preschool Settings.”

98 Mari Riojas-Cortez, “Preschoolers’ Funds of Knowledge Displayed through Sociodramatic Play Episodes in a Bilingual Classroom,” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 29, no. 1 (2001): 35–40.

99 Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, eds., *Funds of Knowledge*.

100 Adair, “Examining Whiteness as an Obstacle.”

101 Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti, eds., *Funds of Knowledge*.

102 Riojas-Cortez, “Preschoolers’ Funds of Knowledge.”

103 Vivian Maria Vasquez, *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

104 Rebecca M. Callahan and Kathryn M. Obenchain, “Bridging Worlds in the Social Studies Classroom: Teachers’ Practices and Latino Immigrant Youths’ Civic and Political Development,” *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* 16 (2013): 97–123.

105 Margarita Calderón et al., “Bringing Words to Life in Classrooms with English Language Learners,” in *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary: Bringing Research to Practice*, eds. Elfriede Hiebert and Michael L. Kamil (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 115–36.



of native languages.

Schools need more bilingual/ESL teachers, especially those who are grounded in early childhood education method and theory. These teachers would ideally have specific, in-depth knowledge of early childhood methods and have pursued a specialization that combines bilingual and/or ESL instructional strategies with early childhood pedagogy. This requirement would change the teacher-training systems of most states, in which educators can only pursue a generalist EC-6 (i.e., preK through grade 6) teaching certification with no emphasis on early childhood methods, or a bilingual/ESL certification with little emphasis on early childhood education.¹⁰⁶ Teacher education programs at the associate's and bachelor's levels would also do well to foster teachers' relationships with immigrant communities.

Schools need more bilingual/ESL teachers, especially those who are grounded in early childhood education method and theory.

Meanwhile, novice teachers need mentoring on how to provide young children of immigrants with rigorous, dynamic learning experiences, even while under pressure to choose more efficient lessons that focus on tested skills and knowledge.

Recommendation No. 5: Invest in creative education strategies for schools serving children of immigrants. Schools and programs that serve young children of immigrants require significant investment. A particular focus should be those schools striving to offer dynamic, sophisticated learning experiences, along with culturally and linguistically supportive assessments that capture many developmental domains.¹⁰⁷ Researchers should explore the impacts of high-quality early education programs on the academic success and life outcomes of immigrants' children. Also worth exploring are various ways to support children's language development while engaging them in the classroom. It is crucial to invest in programs that help children of immigrants succeed in school while still maintaining vital cultural and linguistic connections to their families and communities. Finally, policymakers require empirical evidence of what happens to young children of immigrants when they are in early educational contexts where discrimination is not present. These efforts would go far toward making early childhood education more equitable, enjoyable, and beneficial for the children of immigrants.

106 Aisha Ray, Barbara Bowman, and Jean Robbins, "Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Successfully Educate All Children: The Contribution of State Boards of Higher Education and National Professional Accreditation Organizations," *Report to the Foundation for Child Development* (Chicago: Erikson Institute, 2006).

107 Espinosa and García, "Developmental Assessment of Young Dual Language Learners."



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About the Author



Jennifer Keys Adair is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Texas at Austin, where she studies the role of agency in transforming the learning experiences of young children. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, she is concerned with racial, cultural, and crosscultural understandings of early childhood education, particularly the experiences of teachers, parents, and children from immigrant communities.

Her work has been published in journals such as the *Harvard Educational Review*; *Teachers College Record*; *Race, Ethnicity and Education*; *Young Children*; and *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. She coauthored, with Joseph Tobin and Angela Arzubiaga, *Children Crossing Borders* (Russell Sage, 2013), about the perspectives of immigrant parents and preschool teachers on early childhood education.

In 2012 Dr. Adair became a Young Scholar (2012-15) with the Foundation for Child Development (FCD) to conduct research on how culturally relevant types of agency in early elementary classrooms affect the social and academic development of children from Latino immigrant communities. Dr. Adair was recently awarded a major grant by the Spencer Foundation to continue her work on agency with young children from Latino immigrant families. This current work compares how young children from indigenous and immigrant communities in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States develop dispositions towards civic action and advocacy by being able to use culturally varied versions of agency.

Dr. Adair, who is a former preschool teacher, completed a PhD in anthropology and education at Arizona State University, with an emphasis on comparative perspectives on early childhood education.



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