



# The selection of preschool for immigrant and native-born Latino families in the United States<sup>☆</sup>



Arya Ansari

Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, University of Virginia, PO Box 800784, Charlottesville, VA 22908-0784, United States

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## ABSTRACT

With the national push to expand preschool education, there has been growing interest in understanding why Latino families are enrolled in preschool at lower rates than non-Latino families. This study applied the accommodations model by Meyers and Jordan (2006) to the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort ( $n = 5850$ ) to provide a more nuanced understanding of the preschool selection of U.S.- and foreign-born Latino families. Results from this investigation underscored the similarities and differences that existed in the selection behaviors of different groups of families, while also highlighting important differences within the Latino population. In general, these differences within the Latino population cut across community language use, child factors, and parents' beliefs about school readiness. Moreover, after accounting for the various selection factors, there were no longer any consistent differences in the preschool enrollment rates between Latino children and their Black and White peers. When taken together, these findings suggest that careful attention must be paid to the heterogeneity in the experiences of Latino families in navigating the preschool market.

## 1. Introduction

There has been an increased interest in preschool education as a means of reducing socio-demographic disparities in children's early learning and development (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). Indeed, a large empirical literature has established the effectiveness of preschool programs in preparing children for kindergarten (Bumgarner & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013; Winsler et al., 2008) and setting the stage for a lifetime of success (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001; Vandell, Burchinal, & Pierce, 2016). Preschool programs, therefore, can serve as actionable points of intervention in reducing the intergenerational transmission of inequality.

Given that preschool programs serve as a potential policy lever for reducing disparities in early learning, understanding why differences emerge in the enrollment of children constitutes an important research endeavor. Of particular interest are Latino families who constitute roughly 17% of the U.S. population and represent the fastest-growing sub-segment of the country (Pew Research Center, 2015), but are the least likely group to enroll their children in preschool during the year before kindergarten. Nationally, 54% of all children attend preschool at

the age of 4, but the 44% enrollment rate of Latino children is significantly lower than non-Latino White and Black children (56–57%; Child Trends, 2014). Why are Latino parents enrolling their children in preschool at lower rates than other parents? To address this question it is necessary to consider the processes involved in parents' decision-making regarding preschool as compared with informal care and parental care, which are two options that Latino families use more often.

To this end, I draw from Meyers and Jordan's (2006) accommodations model, which contends that preschool selection is not simply an individual choice, but instead, is reflective of the competing demands that parents' experience. By considering the ways in which this model of preschool selection might vary as a function of families' racial/ethnic group membership, this study seeks to move beyond a discussion of the racial/ethnic disparities in preschool enrollment and to provide a more nuanced understanding of why these disparities might exist.

### 1.1. Viewing preschool enrollment through the lens of Latino families

Why Latino families are less likely to enroll their children in preschool has remained contested. Some scholars have argued that Latino families are less likely to enroll their children in preschool because of familial and

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E-mail address: [aa2zz@eservices.virginia.edu](mailto:aa2zz@eservices.virginia.edu).

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cultural values (Fuller & García Coll, 2010), whereas others suggest that these differences are due to issues of access (Ansari & Winsler, 2012; Yesil-Dagli, 2011). These assertions often stem from studies of the parenting behaviors of parents from different backgrounds, such as those of native- and immigrant-born Latinos, which have illustrated the different views and practices around raising children that might extend to preschool enrollment (Crosnoe, Ansari, Purtell, & Wu, 2016). Despite the potential differences in parental decision-making about the early schooling of Latino children and perceived maternal roles, Latino families, unlike other populations in the U.S., often face challenges that go beyond economic disadvantage. That is, economic hardship is compounded by the fact that Latino families must deal with additional cultural and linguistic barriers as well as unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system (García & Jensen, 2007). Preschool selection, therefore, can manifest in different ways, especially for immigrant Latino families who tend to have less experience in the U.S. school system (Crosnoe, Ansari et al., 2016).

Although there has been growing interest in understanding the processes involved in preschool selection (Coley, Votruba-Drzal, Collins, & Miller, 2014; Crosnoe, Purtell, Davis-Kean, Ansari, & Benner, 2016; Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996; Ha, Magnuson, & Ybarra, 2012), prior studies have generally not differentiated these processes by race/ethnicity and/or nativity, and those that have (Daugherty, 2009; Yesil-Dagli, 2011), have focused on Latino families without cross racial/ethnic group or within group comparisons (for an exception see Fuller et al., 1996). Without such comparisons, strong conclusions cannot be drawn about the reasons why Latino families choose less formal arrangements and whether these reasons are similar to (or different from) other populations. In light of the mounting evidence suggesting that poverty, low parental education, and lack of employment are associated with parents' selection of preschool (Coley et al., 2014; Crosnoe, Purtell et al., 2016) and the fact that Latino families are also more likely to be living in poverty (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013), it is likely that selection of preschool by Latino families remains confounded with socioeconomic barriers.

Thus, to have the greatest impact, we not only need to know why Latino families enroll their children in preschool, but the extent to which these reasons differ both within the Latino population and between different groups of families. Such inquiry is grounded in ecological and cultural theories (Weisner, 2002), which contend that individual-level processes, such as preschool selection, are influenced by the socio-cultural conditions and the local communities in which families live. Reflecting these notions are studies of the immigrant paradox, which find the children of immigrants who acculturate to the U.S. over time exhibit less optimal outcomes (Marks, Ejessi, & García Coll, 2014)—a phenomenon that might also extend to the selection of preschool. These education-related paradoxes stem from the fact that the families that select to immigrate to the U.S. are often in search of occupational and educational advancement, which are positive attributes that are lost in subsequent generations who experience a disproportionate amount of poverty and, therefore, have fewer opportunities for upward mobility (Buriel, 2012). Thus, we need to know how these individual-level processes within Latino families compare with the historically least (U.S.-born Black) and most advantaged (U.S.-born White) segments of the U.S. population (Crosnoe, Bonazzo, & Wu, 2015). We also need to gauge assimilation among Latino families and determine how these broader stratification systems affect within group heterogeneity. To address these possibilities, however, requires theoretically grounded and advanced research methods.

## 1.2. The accommodations model for preschool selection

The present study is guided by economic theories of preschool selection, which argue that parents' choices are based on a series of accommodations (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). Balancing between competing demands, preschool selection is not simply about parents' preferences; rather, they are contextualized actions that also reflect families' needs, resources, cultural norms, opportunities, and constraints. Put another

way, the fact that Latino families are less likely to enroll their children in preschool does not simply reflect their a priori likings or penchant for cultural matches between the home and school institutions—one of the underlying assumptions about the enrollment gap between Latino families and their non-Latino counterparts. Instead, this theoretical model contends that we must pay closer attention to the contexts in which these decisions are being made and the ways in which broader community systems shape parents' needs and preferences and, in turn, how their preferences map onto their decisions. Ultimately, while it is true that all parents experience competing demands that result in tradeoffs, these tradeoffs occur across different contexts that require attention (Meyers & Jordan, 2006).

Thus, to understand why parents select different types of preschool programs for their children, Meyers and Jordan (2006) argue that we need to move beyond the notion that these are fully informed “choices” that occur in isolation, which provides an incomplete understanding of the complex processes underlying preschool selection. Instead, the accommodations model argues that, to understand parents' decisions, we need to explore how these decisions are influenced by a set of dynamic and interrelated processes that serve as accommodations to the preschool market. In studying parents' preschool decisions, Meyers and Jordan (2006) point to the importance of five set of factors that might influence parents' decisions: *family necessity* (e.g., parental employment and work schedules), *family resources* (e.g., income and household quality), *families' beliefs and expectations* (e.g., cultural consistency and the importance of children's academic preparedness for kindergarten), *child factors* (e.g., children's cognitive skills and social-behavior), and the *community context* (e.g., geographic location and preschool availability), which are discussed in more detail below.

Reflecting these theoretical concepts developed by Meyers and Jordan (2006), two recent studies provided a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which this model shapes parents' decision making across different developmental stages (Coley et al., 2014) and the socio-economic gradient (Crosnoe, Purtell et al., 2016). The current study pushes the early childhood field forward by considering how the accommodations model works across different cultural backgrounds, which was *not* considered by Coley et al. (2014) or Crosnoe, Purtell et al. (2016); in doing so, this study can provide important insight into why families from different cultural backgrounds are more or less likely to enroll their children in preschool. That is, although much of the disparities in preschool enrollment map onto race/ethnicity and socio-economic status (Crosnoe, 2007), it remains possible that race/ethnicity conditions how different factors from the accommodations model (that differ both within and between groups) influence families' decisions (Fuller et al., 1996; Huston, Chang, & Gennetian, 2002; Radey & Brewster, 2007). This possibility is supported by the aforementioned ecocultural theory, which posits that children's experiences and families' decisions are influenced by their own cultural contexts (Weisner, 2002).

### 1.2.1. Family necessity

Parents' decisions regarding preschool is made within the broader context of family circumstances which, pooled together, reflect family necessity. Indeed, the accommodation model argues that families' need for care is rooted within the broader familial context that includes maternal employment, parents' marital status, and number of children in the household (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). In support of this theory, prior studies have found that mothers who work outside of the home, are not partnered with the child's other parent, or have fewer children are more likely to enroll their children in preschool (Crosnoe, 2007; Fuller et al., 1996; Singer, Fuller, Keiley, & Wolf, 1998). In contrast, the availability of a relative improves the likelihood that parents will place their children in informal care (Capizzano, 2006). Just as these family circumstances shape parents' need for preschool, Meyers and Jordan (2006) also argue that they also shape how parents evaluate their options, such that parents who have specific needs (e.g., a mom non-standard work schedules) not only require care for their children, but will likely prefer a program that can accommodate their needs. At the

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