



Child care enrollment decisions among dual language learner families: The role of Spanish language instruction in the child care setting[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 June 2015

Received in revised form

30 December 2015

Accepted 2 January 2016

Available online 28 January 2016

Keywords:

DLLs

Head Start

Child care decisions

Enrollment

ABSTRACT

Data from the Head Start Impact Study ($N = 1141$) and the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey, 2009 Cohort ($N = 825$) were used to describe child care enrollment decisions among Spanish-speaking Dual Language Learner (DLL) families. In particular, logistic regression models tested which child, family, and institutional characteristics predicted enrollment in early care and education (ECE) settings that used Spanish for instruction versus enrollment in settings that did not use Spanish. Results showed that whether the child's first language was exclusively Spanish and whether other DLL families previously attended the ECE arrangement strongly predicted whether that child enrolled. Policy implications for Head Start-eligible Spanish-speaking DLLs are discussed.

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Close to 60% of U.S. children under five years are cared for in non-parental settings including relative care (Laughlin, 2013). Enrolling children in child care is often a complex decision that parents make in light of both opportunities and constraints. Family and child characteristics, community contextual factors, and parental preferences all play a role in child care decisions (Chaudry, Henly, & Meyers, 2010; Pungello and Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Weber, 2011). Low-income parents in particular must often navigate the child care selection process with incomplete information about quality, cost, and alternative arrangements, while simultaneously juggling work schedules and the requirements of government subsidy programs (Chaudry et al., 2010). Dual Language Learner (DLL) families – families with young children tasked with learning more than one language simultaneously, their home language and English (Espinosa, 2013) – in particular may face an even more constrained child care decision-making process given that their English language skills may be limited. Because the majority of DLLs come from Spanish-speaking homes (García, 2012), Spanish use in the child care setting may prove a critical factor influencing enrollment decisions for the DLL population.

Research syntheses to date have begun to enumerate important factors affecting the child care choice process for low-income families (Chaudry et al., 2010; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Weber, 2011). However, much less is known about child care decisions for Spanish-speaking DLL families despite the dramatically increasing numbers of DLL children in early care and education (ECE) arrangements like Head Start and Early Head Start (nearly 40% of participants; U.S. DHHS, 2013a). Approximately 30% of all Spanish-speaking DLL children live in poverty (Stepler and Brown, 2015), and Spanish-speaking DLL children now constitute the largest total population of U.S. children living in poverty (López and Velasco, 2011). Therefore, understanding the processes through which these families in particular negotiate child care experiences given multiple demands and how Spanish use in the child care setting specifically pertains to enrollment decisions, can help inform policy for this fast-growing demographic group.

Using data from the two largest, nationally representative datasets on Head Start – the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS; U.S. DHHS, 2002–2006) and the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey, 2009 Cohort (FACES-2009; U.S. DHHS, 2009–2013) – the purpose of the current study was to gain an understanding of factors that inform child care enrollment decisions among Head Start-eligible Spanish-speaking DLL families. Of particular importance was the examination of the language used by caregivers in the setting, and what may have predicted participation in arrangements that used Spanish for instruction over arrangements that did not use Spanish, as this may have proven critical to the enrollment process.

[☆] Research reported in this publication was supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number P01HD065704. Research was also supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families under Grant Number 90YE0157. The content is solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health or U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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1. Child care decisions in the general population

Theoretical frameworks guiding child care choice have traditionally come from the disciplines of economics (Blau, 2001) and psychology (Pungello and Kurtz-Costes, 1999). From economics, the basic model of consumer choice argues that individuals make decisions by examining tradeoffs among alternatives relative to their preferences, which are subject to time and money constraints. Such a model can predict child care choices as a result of changes in family income or increases in the price of child care. Models from psychology such as the one put forth by Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) argue that the interwoven dimensions of family demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, child characteristics, home and community contexts, and parental beliefs and preferences inform families' child care decisions. Such models are effective at explaining the multidirectional influences of child care choice (Chaudry et al., 2010).

More recently, Meyers and Jordan (2006) proposed an integrated child care decision framework by introducing the concept of child care decisions as "accommodations." This accommodation framework argues that child care decisions are often subject to multiple constraints (not just cost), as parents must optimize the decision not only for themselves, but also for their children, their workplace schedules, and government subsidy program requirements. Thus, child care choices are not discrete and static decisions, but rather are based on a dynamic interplay of opportunities and constraints determined by an extensive range of family, child, and community factors, and tend to change as children age (Chaudry et al., 2010; Meyers & Jordan, 2006). Similarly, Weber (2011) argued that parental characteristics, values, and preferences for child care interact with perceived opportunities, constraints, and barriers, and through this interaction comes the selection of a child care arrangement. Child care decision-making is accordingly not usually a linear process, but one that is multi-faceted and complex.

Using such models, previous research has examined which factors predict child care choices in the general population. It has been well-documented, for example, that highly-educated mothers are more likely to use center-based care than mothers with fewer years of education (Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996a; Fuller, Holloway, Rambaud, & Eggers-Pierola, 1996b; Johansen, Leibowitz, & Waite, 1996; Laughlin, 2013), and higher-income families are also more likely to use center-based care than lower-income families (Blau, 2001; Fuller, Kagan, Caspary, & Gauthier, 2002; Hirshberg, Huang, & Fuller, 2005; Laughlin, 2013). Additionally, infants and children of mothers employed part time tend to be cared for more by relatives than older, preschool-age children and children of mothers employed full time (Early and Burchinal, 2001; Laughlin, 2013). Moreover, parents who planned their child care enrollment earlier were more likely to use their preferred care type and to use higher quality settings relative to those parents who planned later (Gordan and Högnäs, 2006).

Research on racial and ethnic participation in ECE indicates that black families are more likely than white families to select center-based care (Fuller et al., 1996a; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005), whereas Latino (and especially immigrant) families are more likely than other population subgroups to utilize relative or familial childcare (Beltrán, 2011; Fram & Kim, 2008; Fuller et al., 1996a; Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2011; Laughlin, 2013; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Other recent research, however, suggests that if center-based care options are available and accessible, and families know of their existence, Latino and DLL children will attend at the same rates as children of other subgroups (Espinosa et al., 2013; Greenberg & Kahn, 2012; Greenfader and Miller, 2014; Winsler, Robinson, & Thibodeaux, 2013).

2. Child care decisions among Spanish-speaking DLL families

In the general population, traditional choice frameworks are quite useful for articulating factors that may inform child care decisions. However, when examining the child care experiences of specifically Spanish-speaking DLL families, a sociocultural theory of development (Rogoff, 2003) may be an appropriate additional analytical lens. According to sociocultural theory, children make sense of the world around them within the specific context of their culture, and their development is an interrelated process between the individual child and their broader social environment. Much less is known about the choice process for Spanish-speaking DLL families given the historic lower levels of enrollment in center-based ECE of some Spanish-speaking DLL groups such as Mexican-origin Latinos (Espinosa et al., 2013; Winsler et al., 2013). Further, despite research indicating the benefits of ECE for low-income Spanish-speaking DLL children (Buysse, Peisner-Feinberg, Pérez, Hammer, & Knowles, 2014; Gormley, 2008; Loeb, Bridges, Bassok, Fuller, & Rumberger, 2007; U.S. DHHS, 2010a), other work indicates that poor access to ECE programs is a major barrier to their participation (Espinosa, 2013; Greenfader & Miller, 2014; Hernandez et al., 2011; Matthews and Jang, 2007), and even if such options are available, parents may not always be aware of their existence (Matthews and Jang, 2007). Consequently, in addition to the traditional consumer decision-making literature and the accommodation framework (Meyers and Jordan, 2006; Weber, 2011), Spanish-speaking DLL families' child care decisions are further subject to unique constraints of access, availability, and awareness of options within a broader sociocultural framework. Salient sociocultural factors pertaining to such access, availability, and awareness like immigration status, English language proficiency, country of origin, and language of the ECE setting may therefore be important theoretical considerations for their child care experiences (Hernandez et al., 2011).

Although prior studies have attempted to ascertain which factors most strongly influence low-income Spanish-speaking DLL families' child care enrollment decisions, the research field is still nascent. The literature to date suggest that ECE enrollment decisions among Spanish-speaking DLL families may be particularly related to: (1) *monetary and other constraints* similar to other low-income families such as family earnings and the supply of ECE options in local communities (Delgado, 2009; Greenfader & Miller, 2014; Hernandez et al., 2011; Santhiveeran, 2010); (2) *factors specific to Spanish-speaking DLL families* such as country of origin, immigration status, parental fluency with English, and enrollment of other DLL families at the center (Greenfader and Miller, 2014; Hirshberg et al., 2005; Liang, Fuller, & Singer, 2000; Miller, Votruba-Drzal, & Coley, 2013; Vesely, 2013; Ward, LaChance, & Atkins, 2011); and (3) *factors specific to Spanish-speaking DLL children* such as the child's Spanish and English language abilities and skills (Espinosa, 2013; Winsler et al., 2014).

2.1. The role of language of ECE setting

National Head Start policy mandates that its providers support DLL children's home language and deliver services to families in culturally responsive ways (U.S. DHHS, 2008). Therefore, a few select researchers have begun recently to focus on language of the ECE setting as a particularly salient factor related to the enrollment decisions of Spanish-speaking DLL families. Some of these studies are limited either by small sample sizes or samples not representative of the DLL population in the U.S. However, they are worth examining given this important and newly-emerging line of research inquiry, and because they employ a wide variety of research methods. Some are small qualitative studies, which help

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