



The impact of a vocational education program for childcare providers on children's well-being



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ABSTRACT

The early childhood community-based program *Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar* serves 800,000 low-income children under the age of 5 in Colombia. Earlier studies have identified care providers (*madres comunitarias*) as having, on average, low education levels and not being appropriately trained for the provision of childcare services. In 2007, a vocational education program was introduced which offers a degree in child development and care for childcare providers. In this paper we assess the effects of this program on the quality of care provided in the relevant nurseries and on the nutritional and health status, as well as cognitive and socio-emotional development of beneficiary children in Bogotá. This evaluation takes advantage of the gradual geographic expansion of the program in order to estimate treatment effects. Results indicate that the quality of care has significantly increased in these family-based nurseries and that the program has thus had a positive and significant effect on the health, cognitive and socio-emotional development of beneficiary children, especially those younger than 3 years of age.

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1. Introduction

Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar ICBF (HCB) is a home-based childcare program that was established in 1972 in Colombia with the primary aim of providing childcare to vulnerable families and thereby promoting female labor participation. The program currently delivers home-based childcare, supplemental nutrition, and psychosocial stimulation to 784,000 low-income children under the age of 6 (32% of eligible children between the ages of 0 and 5) in almost 79,000 HCBs throughout most of Colombia's 1,100 municipalities. Historically, the implementation of early childhood and family support policies in Colombia has been led by the National Institute of Family Welfare (ICBF). The ICBF's budget repre-

sents 0.3% of GDP and has traditionally been funded through payroll taxes (Bernal & Camacho, 2012).

The central features of the HCB program are the provision of 50–70% of daily nutritional requirements through lunch and two snacks, and the promotion of children's physical growth and health, and their social and cognitive development. Participating parents are required to pay a monthly fee of no more than 25% of the daily minimum wage. Traditional HCB childcare homes are led by a "community mother" (MC), a home-based childcare provider who lives in the same community. During weekdays, each childcare home serves up to 15 children between the ages of 6 months and 5 years via part-time or full-time schedules. The cost of the program is around USD 430 per child per year.

Bernal et al. (2009) and Bernal and Fernandez (2013) conclude that long-term exposure to the program, versus short-term program exposure, has a positive effect on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. However, the authors also report severe flaws in the quality of the care provided, which significantly decreases the potential effects

Abbreviations: ICBF, Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Family Welfare Agency); HCB, *Hogares Comunitarios* (home-based nurseries); MC, for *madres comunitarias* (care providers at *Hogares Comunitarios*).

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of the program. In particular, they reveal that care providers (MCs) have, on average, low education levels and are not appropriately trained for the provision of childcare services. Bernal et al. (2009) report that almost 16% of MCs have completed primary school or a lower level of education, 68% are high-school dropouts, 16% are high-school graduates, and only a few have at least one year of college or vocational education. In addition, MCs score approximately 57% on the Knowledge of Infant Development Inventory (KIDI; MacPhee, 1981), a 58-item instrument that assesses a caregiver's factual knowledge of childcare/parenting practices, health and safety, developmental processes, and milestones.

The authors also report that ratings on the Family Day Care Rating Scale (FCDRS; Harms & Clifford, 1989) are low ($M = 3.02$; $SD = 0.89$; scale range 1–7). FDCRS total scores are higher for HCBs led by MCs with a vocational or professional degree ($M = 3.08$; $SD = 0.83$), compared with those led by MCs with basic primary schooling ($M = 2.70$; $SD = 0.65$). These scores suggest that only the minimum required conditions are met in the daycare setting according to international standards.

These findings have partly motivated the design and implementation of a vocational education program for early childhood development and care for MCs, which is offered jointly by ICBF and the National Adult Learning Agency (SENA), the institution in charge of adult training programs in Colombia. The program offers a vocational education degree over two academic semesters and approximately 2640 h of instruction. The program is aimed at: (1) improving knowledge about early childhood development, developmental milestones, and appropriate educational and stimulation practices by age range; (2) promoting the development of specific curricular guidelines aimed at improving children's cognitive and socio-emotional development; (3) developing skills aimed at promoting children's health and nutrition from gestation to the age of 6; and (4) providing MCs with appropriate training in cases of sudden illness or accident.

In this paper we evaluate the effects of this vocational education program in Early Childhood Development and Care (ECDC), which is offered at no cost to MCs in the city of Bogotá who voluntarily agree to participate. The program has been introduced throughout regions and within city neighborhoods in a somewhat random order and at a sporadic pace. We exploit the program's gradual expansion in Bogotá in order to assess its effects on the quality of care offered through HCB and its effects on nutrition, health, and cognitive and non-cognitive development of beneficiary children.

This evaluation contributes to early childhood and education literature across various dimensions. First, it shows the direct effects of the program on children being taken care of by these childcare providers. Second, it highlights the importance of vocational education beyond labor market outcomes of beneficiaries of that education. Finally, this paper adds to an understanding of the characteristics of childcare providers that have a positive impact on children and the cost-effective ways of enhancing their skills. As evidenced in the education literature, it is difficult to determine the characteristics of "good teachers" in the case of early education. In general, evidence does not support any association between a teacher's educational qualifications and program quality or

child learning. Previous studies report no general effects for any level of education beyond a high school diploma (Bernal & Fernández, 2013; Early et al., 2006; Nores & Barnett, 2013; Early et al., 2007).¹ We provide evidence of a vocational education program for childcare providers that can have a significant effect on child development. This is particularly important since many countries in the Latin America region provide early childhood services for children younger than five via very similar home-based programs.²

The results indicate that quality of care has increased significantly since the introduction of the program and that pedagogical processes have improved. In particular, the implementation of learning activities, the use of pedagogical resources, and interactions between parents and care providers have increased. Consequently, we observe positive and significant effects for beneficiary children in treated HCBs regarding health, and cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, particularly for children between the ages of 6 months and 3 years. These results are both interesting and extremely relevant to education policy because they suggest that it is possible to improve the quality of such an inexpensive childcare program.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we describe the ECDC program in detail. In Section 3 we present the evaluation strategy. In Section 4 we present the results of the evaluation and Section 5 concludes.

2. The ECDC program

Together with SENA, the ICBF designed and implemented the ECDC program in 2007 in order to offer vocational education to the care providers of HCB, known as *madres comunitarias* (MCs), in topics relating to ECDC. The program's objective is to offer pedagogical tools that (1) respond with quality and relevance to the needs of children between the ages of 0 and 6; (2) promote permanent analysis, training, and research concerning these needs; (3) design responses to concrete problems that are latent in different modes of early childhood programs; and (4) promote participation and permanent interactions with parents and the community (SENA, 2007). The program has a total duration of 2640 h of training, of which 1320 comprise guided classes with instructors, 440 involve individual work and 880 are devoted to group and individual projects. Individual and group work is emphasized to promote problem-solving skills. The program is free for MCs but tuition costs per MC for SENA are USD 684.

The program is aimed at improving pedagogical practices among childcare providers (MCs). This is achieved through a structured curriculum of five components: (1) Educational processes during early childhood aimed at promoting child cognitive development; (2) promotion of socio-emotional abilities during early childhood; (3) assistance in cases of accident and sudden illness; (4) child nutritional and health status from gestation to 6 years of age; and (5) ethics,

¹ Note that in the case of HCB in 2007, close to 84% of assessed childcare providers had not even graduated from high school. Thus very low educational attainment becomes problematic.

² For example, Programa de Desarrollo Infantil in Bolivia, Hogares de Cuidado Diario in Venezuela, Estancias in Mexico, and Programa Nacional Wawa Wasi in Peru.

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