



# Predictors of public early care and education use among children of low-income immigrants☆



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## ABSTRACT

Little is known about predictors of publicly funded early care and education (ECE) use among low-income children of immigrants. Without this knowledge, it is difficult to effectively increase participation in these public programs, which promote school readiness but are underused by children of immigrants. Using nationally representative data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), this study attempts to identify pertinent family, child, maternal ECE preference, broader contextual, and immigrant specific characteristics predictive of ECE use among 4-year-old children in a sample of low-income children of immigrants ( $N \approx 1050$ ). Specifically, we estimate multinomial logistic regression models predicting type of ECE (Head Start, public pre-k, subsidized ECE, unsubsidized ECE, parental care) from these characteristics. Findings suggest that even in a low-income sample, correlates of disadvantage such as low maternal education and prior receipt of public benefits are important predictors of public ECE use, as are maternal preferences for certain features of care and supply-side factors such as ECE availability. Immigrant-specific factors such as English proficiency, citizenship status, availability of non-English speaking caregivers, and generosity of state policies toward immigrants emerged as particularly salient for explaining the public ECE selection patterns of low-income immigrants. Results point to future research areas and potential policy solutions aimed at increasing public ECE use for children who may stand to benefit the most.

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## 1. Introduction

Approximately one-quarter of all U.S. children are children from immigrant families; by 2050, children of immigrants will make up nearly one-third of the U.S. child population (Passel, 2011; Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Concerning recent estimates suggest that almost 50% of young children of immigrants live in low-income households (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2015; Mather, 2009). At the same time, immigrants tend to underutilize social programs, including programs with income eligibility limits for which many immigrants are eligible (Capps, Fix, & Henderson, 2009; Perreira et al., 2012). This includes underutilization of publicly funded early care and education (ECE) programs. A range of explanations for this possible underutilization have been proposed, including preferences and values stemming from unique cultural

origins, stigma and fear of deportation, disenfranchisement and acculturative stress, the high cost of some ECE programs, and perceived cost of program participation even for programs that are no- or low-cost (Brandon, 2004; Fix & Passel, 2002; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Liang, Fuller, & Singer, 2000; Matthews & Ewen, 2006). Whatever the reason, underutilization of public ECE programming is concerning as participation in ECE programs – including those that are publicly funded – has been shown to boost school readiness among young children of immigrants who are at risk for low achievement (Ansari & Winsler, 2013; Bloom & Weiland, 2015; Crosnoe, 2007; Johnson, Han, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2014; Magnuson, Lahaie, & Waldfogel, 2006; Gormley, 2008). As such, publicly funded ECE programs might be among the most promising avenues for improving low-income immigrant children's school readiness due to their relative affordability. Access to public ECE programs is also amenable to policy intervention. Yet few studies have explored the predictors of selection into *publicly funded* ECE programs, which leave policymakers with limited options when thinking about how to increase enrollment.

The current analysis aims to address this important question. Specifically, we examine a comprehensive set of predictors of public ECE selection in a recent and nationally representative sample of low-income children born in the U.S. to at least one immigrant parent. To

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do this, we include potential predictors of immigrant families' home and community contexts, to help illuminate a wide-ranging set of possible intervention points for increasing enrollment in publicly funded ECE programs.

### 1.1. Background

The public ECE programs available to low-income families in the U.S. – including low-income immigrant families – can be broadly categorized by three funding streams. The first is the federal Head Start program. The oldest public ECE program, Head Start was introduced in 1965 following a compensatory model of early education. Its aim is thus to enhance low-income children's readiness for school by compensating for what they are less likely to receive at home (Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). As such, Head Start is targeted to families with incomes at or below 100% of the Federal Poverty Line, is typically offered in center-based settings (though home-based ECE providers can receive Head Start funding), and is highly regulated, to increase the likelihood that programs provide high quality services that support child development.

The second funding stream is state-funded public pre-k. Although some states offer universal pre-k programs, nearly half of the states that have pre-k programs prioritize serving low-income children. Like Head Start, public pre-k is typically provided in center- or school-based settings, and was also designed to promote school readiness among children who may otherwise lag behind in academic skills (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, & Clarke Brown, 2013).

The third funding stream for public ECE is the federal child care subsidy program (the Child Care and Development Fund [CCDF]). Unlike both Head Start and public pre-k, the CCDF subsidy program was crafted primarily to support parental employment rather than child development and as such, is somewhat flexible; CCDF subsidizes care in the form of vouchers to parents or direct contracted slots in which children are enrolled (Adams & Rohacek, 2002), though some states place restrictions on where subsidies can be used. Thus while Head Start and public pre-k programs are typically offered in licensed, center-based settings, care funded via child care subsidies can occur in licensed or unlicensed center- or home-based settings with care providers who are unfamiliar or who are friends or relatives, allowing families some degree of choice when selecting an ECE environment.

To summarize broadly, existing public ECE options available to low-income families range from being flexible – CCDF vouchers that can be used to purchase care the family selects, assuming the provider accepts subsidies – to more proscribed – slots located in programs that are often center-based, like Head Start and public pre-k. Additionally, while all 3 public programs are targeted mostly (pre-k) or entirely (Head Start; CCDF subsidies) to families with incomes at or below an income eligibility threshold, only the subsidy program also requires families to meet employment standards: that is, to receive a subsidy, parents must be engaged in approved work, education, or job training activities.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.2. Theoretical framework

Our study is guided by prior theoretical and empirical work on parents' ECE decision-making more generally (Chaudry, Henly, & Meyers, 2010; Kim & Fram, 2009; Lowe & Weisner, 2004; Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Weber, 2011). Specifically, we apply the accommodation model (Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Weber, 2011) and ecocultural theory (Lowe & Weisner, 2004) to the case of parental child care decision-making, with a focus on public ECE use. In brief, the accommodation model suggests that parents do not choose child care so much as they accommodate or integrate decisions about child care alongside interrelated decisions about their roles as caregivers and workers against the backdrop of family, societal, and market constraints. Ecocultural theory in

child care implies that mothers – especially those who are low-income – choose care that fits with their daily routines (work; school; caregiving and social responsibilities), which are in turn shaped by cultural (values and beliefs about child-rearing) and ecological (availability of resources) factors. Together, these bodies of literature imply that a thoughtful exploration of predictors of ECE use – including publicly funded ECE – should include factors that capture parental and household level variables, parents' stated preferences for care, and constraints like care availability.

To guide our inclusion of specific predictors into ECE types, we modify and extend an oft-cited model of child care selection (Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999). Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) reviewed literature on child care selection and distilled important factors in explaining parental choice of ECE: (1) maternal characteristics; (2) child characteristics; (3) parental child care preferences; and (4) contextual factors that exist both proximally (i.e., in the home) and more distally (i.e., in the community). Notably, Pungello and Kurtz-Costes sought to explain child care selection among a general population of parents, not specifically low-income parents or immigrant parents, and not necessarily selection into public ECE. Thus we modify and extend the model to our population and ECE types of interest. For instance, low-income families face constraints related to care cost and the ecocultural circumstances and daily stresses that come with balancing work and family in the context of limited resources (Lowe & Weisner, 2004), and thus make different tradeoffs than their more affluent counterparts, when selecting care. Likewise, immigrant parents face different barriers and may hold different values than native-born parents that may influence their selection of ECE (Vesely, 2013). For example, sociocultural theories of development would suggest that immigrant parents from different regions of origin may have culturally-specific beliefs about non-parental care and child development that may give rise to differences in ECE use (Bornstein & Cheah, 2006; Bornstein, 1991; LeVine, 1977). Thus, we select predictors along Pungello and Kurtz-Costes' dimensions that have been theoretically or empirically linked to selection of ECE, especially for preschool-aged children, and extend the model to include broader contextual factors and immigrant-specific characteristics that may be especially salient for low-income immigrant parents.

Because predictors of ECE use among low-income immigrants have not been studied, it is difficult to know *a priori* which factors might be most relevant for ECE selection. Therefore, we turn to prior empirical studies of ECE selection both in the general population as well as among immigrant families and review existing research in the context of these dimensions.

### 1.3. Previous research

Although we are interested in predictors of selection into public ECE (most of which is center-based; e.g. Head Start and public pre-k) among low-income immigrants, much of the existing empirical literature examines factors associated with selection into center- versus home-based ECE (not necessarily publicly funded) in the general population, so we draw primarily on that work, here. Integrating the accommodation model (Meyers & Jordan, 2006) alongside ecocultural factors important for child care decision-making (Lowe & Weisner, 2004) and the conceptual framework inspired by Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999), we organize our review of prior research along four dimensions: (1) maternal characteristics; (2) child characteristics; (3) parental child care preferences; and (4) contextual factors. We include a fifth dimension that encompasses immigrant-specific characteristics that may be salient when considering publicly funded ECE selection for immigrant families.

#### 1.3.1. Maternal characteristics

Prior research suggests highly-educated mothers are more likely than less educated mothers to use center-based ECE (Fuller, Holloway & Liang, 1996; Fuller, Holloway, Rambaud & Eggers-Pierola, 1996;

<sup>1</sup> We note that states vary in their income eligibility and work requirement rules for the CCDF subsidy program; detailed information is available in Schulman & Black, 2015.

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