

# Making the Link

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## Quality Rating and Improvement Systems: Considerations for Children from Immigrant Families

By *Iheoma U. Iruka and Sandra García, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

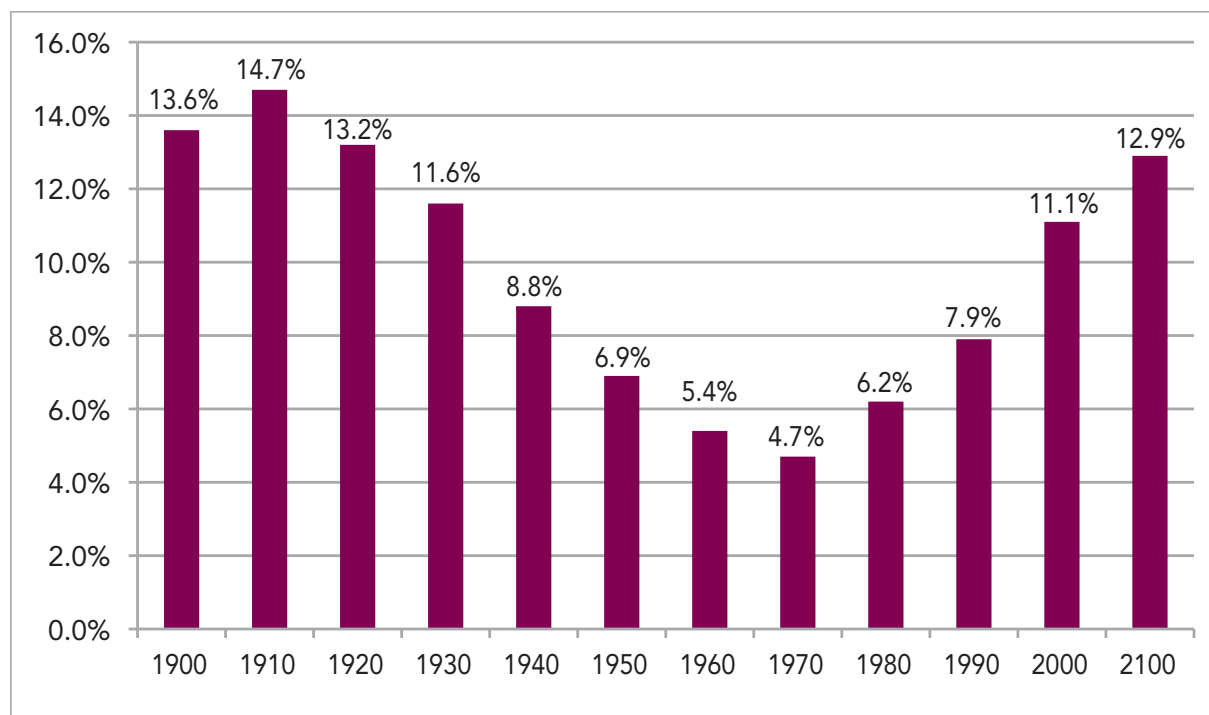
America is a land of immigrants. As the percentage of immigrants in the U.S. has steadily increased over the last forty years (see Figure 1 below),<sup>1</sup> it is not surprising to find that many children in the U.S. are now born to at least one foreign born parent or are immigrants themselves. One out of every four children is from an immigrant family, totaling approximately 18.4 million immigrant children.<sup>2</sup> A majority of these children reside in California, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Nevada,

Hawaii, Texas, Massachusetts, Illinois, Arizona, and New Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

### IMMIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS

Immigrants are diverse, having different countries of origin, languages, education, employment status, and poverty levels. Within the past ten years, the majority of immigrants arriving in

Figure 1. Percent Immigrants in the United States – 1900-2010



Source. Camarota, S. A. (2012). *Immigrants in the United States: A profile of American's foreign-born population*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Immigration Studies.

the U.S. were of Mexican origin. While that proportion remains high (approximately 29%), many immigrants are also coming from East Asia, Europe, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-four percent of children of immigrants live in households where no one in the home speaks English fluently.<sup>2</sup> Although immigrants are more likely than natives to have less than a high school education (28% vs. 7.2%), almost a third (29%) have a Bachelor's degree or more, which is comparable to natives at 33%.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, immigrants and natives have comparable employment levels – 68% – but immigrants who worked full-time and year-round earned 22% less than natives. Cumulating with lower wages and a larger average household size than natives, immigrant households were likely to be poor.<sup>1</sup>

### CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

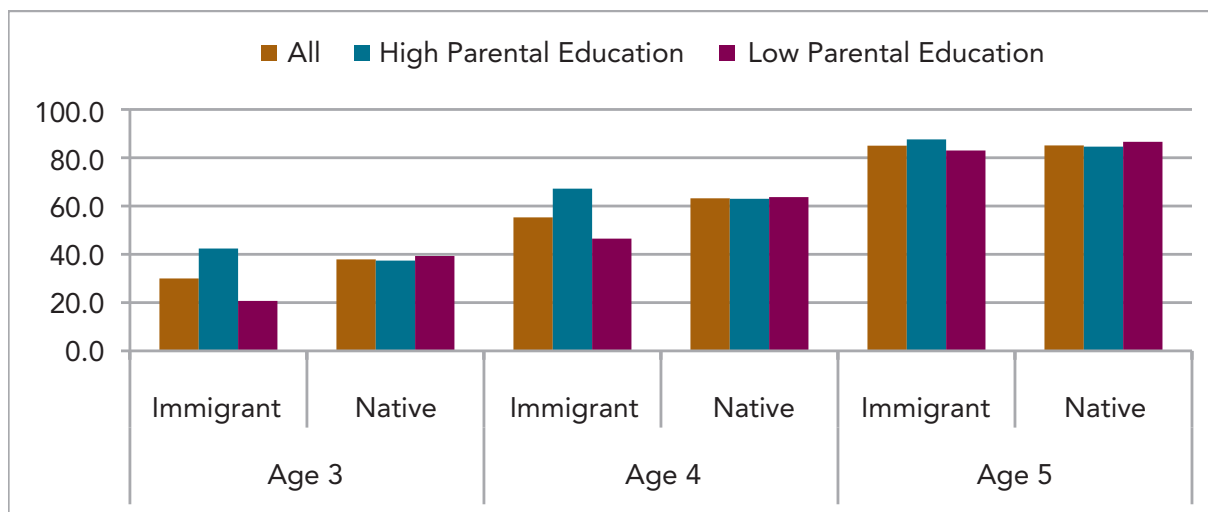
Children of immigrants were more likely to live in poverty when compared to natives (23% vs. 14%).<sup>1</sup> However, poverty rates vary by country of origin, with children in families from Asian countries, such as the Philippines (5.5%) and India (6.2%) having lower poverty rates than children with families from Central and South American countries, such as Honduras (34.0%). Furthermore, children of immigrant families are less likely to reside in one-parent households compared to natives (15.5% vs. 23.8%).<sup>3</sup> The variation by country of origin is also seen in access to health care with fewer immigrants with children from European (e.g., Germany 4.6%) and Asian (e.g., Japan

8.4%) countries without health insurance compared to immigrants with children from Central and South American countries such as Guatemala (46.0%) and Honduras (43.7%). On average, 16% of children of immigrants compared to 8% of children of natives are without insurance.

Compared to native children, children of immigrants are less likely to be in early education programs by the age of four (63% vs. 55%).<sup>3</sup> However, this varies by race/ethnicity and parental education level with higher income parents likely to enroll children in child care or preschool (see Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> A recent report notes that Black immigrants have the second highest rates behind native Asians in enrolling children in early education programs.<sup>5</sup> These lower rates have a potential impact on children's academic achievement. While data collected from the National Assessment of Educational Progress does not collect whether children are from immigrant families, by using Dual Language Learners (DLLs)<sup>4</sup> as a proxy for children from immigrant families and English Only Learner as a proxy for children from native families, results indicate the 44% of English Only Learners compared to 14% of DLLs score proficient in the 2011 4th grade math test; and 37% compared to 7% on the 4th grade reading test.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, children from immigrant families show disadvantages in several key indicators: **health insurance coverage, academic scores, attendance in early education programs, high school graduation, and household income and poverty.**<sup>2</sup>

Figure 2. Attendance in Early Education Programs by Parental Education Level and Immigrant Status



Source. Hernandez, D. J. (2004). *Demographic change and the life circumstances of immigrant families. The Future of Children, 14(2), 17-47.*



## ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS (QRIS)

QRIS are quality initiatives with the purpose of systematically evaluating and improving the quality of early education settings through a uniform approach based on state or local standards. QRIS standards and criteria are usually based on:

- Licensing;
- Staff qualifications;
- Early childhood education environment;
- Family partnership;
- Administration and management; and
- Accreditation.<sup>6</sup>

Though not seen consistently or addressed comprehensively in all QRIS programs, curriculum, ratio and group size, community involvement, provisions for special needs, and cultural and linguistic diversity are sometimes also included in QRIS standards.<sup>6</sup> In many instances, programs are given points or placed at a specific level on a scale based on the criteria they meet within the QRIS (for example, from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest level of quality). A program's points or level can then be used to help tailor professional development supports and activities to achieve an even higher level of quality.

As the U.S. becomes more minority majority, cultural and linguistic diversity will become a key issue when developing goals, policies, and practices to meet the needs of children and families. This will become a more prominent issue for agencies and systems, including QRIS, that are specifically focused on supporting families and strengthening children's development and learning, especially children and families most in need (e.g., minority, poor, and immigrant families). An example of this emphasis is seen in the Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant competition which required states to develop a comprehensive system focused on enhancing and monitoring the quality of ECE settings and supports provided to enhance quality, while aligning and collaborating with other agencies and systems, including the K–12 system.

However, questions remain about whether QRIS and other quality initiatives are considering the needs of immigrant families and children in the development, validation, evaluation, and revisions to the system.

- (a) *Are the needs of immigrant children and families considered in the development, validation, evaluation and revision of the QRIS?*  
The short-term goal of most QRIS is to improve quality, with the long-term goal of preparing children for kindergarten. In

some instances, particular focus is paid to children receiving subsidies with the assumption that it will include the highest need children and families, such as immigrant families and children of immigrants. Evidence suggests that immigrant families are less likely to seek government assistance or subsidies even when they qualify.<sup>7</sup> Thus, other mechanisms must be sought in order to determine the need and impact of QRIS on immigrant children and families. Currently, few states focus on the unique needs of immigrant children and families, especially children from families with the most need. Consideration of the population that will likely benefit may result in different training options, measures, and criteria indicators.

- (b) *Are QRIS programs ensuring that children from immigrant families are in high-quality ECE programs?* Early education is thought of as a buffer and protective factor for disadvantaged children by setting the foundation for children's learning through high-quality experiences, interactions, and opportunities.<sup>8</sup> However, studies show that Dual Language Learners, minority children, and low-income children are often in low-quality programs.<sup>9</sup> In particular, Hispanic and DLL children are often in familial or unregulated care, which are often lowest quality.<sup>10-12</sup> This means that children from poor immigrant families are less likely to experience enriching and stimulating early learning opportunities as well as highly educated and responsive caregivers. As the immigrant status of families is not collected, it is unlikely that the types and quality of programs children from immigrant families are attending are being collected either. Though some states have policies and initiatives that ensure that children who receive subsidies for child care services attend high-quality education programs, these policies do not specifically target children based on language or immigration status. In a 2008 review by the Child and Family Policy Center and the Erikson Institute examining whether QRIS programs incorporated measures related to race, culture, and language, only a handful of states explicitly mentioned language, culture, or race as components of their system.<sup>13</sup> It is hoped that this may change as states revise their systems.

- (c) *Are early childhood educators prepared to meet the needs of children from immigrant families?* The vast majority of early childhood educators are White,<sup>14</sup> but this does not imply they are unable to meet the need of non-White children. However, most early childhood educators are not required to take courses focused on diversity or cultural competence, potentially limiting their skills and knowledge in regards to how best to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children. Further, the majority of QRIS criteria do not include indicators focused on culture and ethnicity and likely do not have training or specific programming focused on supporting the needs of immigrant children and families.

(d) *Is there a system that maintains and extends the investment made in the early years by ensuring that children who attend high-quality ECE programs also attend high-quality elementary schools?* As shown in Figure 2, by age four the majority of children in immigrant families are enrolled in early education programs. Yet almost a quarter of children from immigrant families live in homes where no adult speaks English, have parents with low education, and are living in poverty, which can have ramifications for a child's school preparedness as well as quality of elementary school the child is likely to attend. Some studies show that the positive impact of early education "fades" out possibly due to the low quality schools that children are likely to attend.<sup>15</sup> Recent studies from the Chicago Child-Parent Center intervention show that when there is an alignment between ECE and elementary school, children are likely to maintain the advantage of attending a high-quality ECE program.<sup>16</sup> The alignment between early education through third grade may be even more critical for children from immigrant families, especially from families that are non-English speakers, poor, and have limited formal education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Public Policy.** There needs to be a commitment from local, state, and federal agencies to provide adequate funding for Early Head Start, Head Start, and other early childhood programs, including home visitation programs, with specific incentives to target immigrant children and families. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) has developed recommendations regarding improving access to child care and early education for immigrant families.<sup>17</sup> These include policies that can support and encourage local coordination and collaboration between child care and early education programs and agencies and immigrant-serving organizations, such as providing incentives for child care and early education programs to partner with immigrant-serving organizations and funding for these partnerships.

Specific policies are needed that collect information about the child and family in order to better ensure that children with the highest need are attending high-quality early education programs, regardless of their legal status. Due to heterogeneity in immigrant families, there is a need for national, state, and local administrators to not only collect information on whether a child's parents are U.S. natives or non-U.S. natives, but also information about education, English proficiency, and number of family members in the household, as studies have shown the impact of overcrowding on children's health and achievement.<sup>3</sup> Policies should focus on ensuring that quality enhancement activities, including technical assistance and professional development, consider the population of children and families that programs are serving. Furthermore, QRIS and other systems

should begin to monitor population changes due to the fluctuation of immigrant families and children in order to be proactive in providing appropriate tools to early childhood educators and other professionals.

Policies at the federal and state level focused on QRIS should also include an expectation that systems will provide data on the type of settings that immigrant children are attending and the level of quality across the system (e.g., are most high-quality programs clustered in urban areas and in middle-class areas and are immigrant children attending high-quality programs?) Policies will also guide the state of research examining whether these quality initiatives and systems are improving quality as well as improving outcomes for Dual Language Learners and children from key immigrant populations.

**Practice.** Studies and reports have indicated that poor, minority and non-English-speaking children are less likely to experience enriching teaching and responsive educators compared with their higher-income, White, and English-speaking peers.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, **additional professional development is needed** to ensure that caregivers of children from immigrant families, in particular, are providing high-quality, culturally responsive care. Teachers will be best suited with measurement tools and quality indicators that are able to capture their cultural competence and engagement with families, as well as other aspects of the early education environment often found to be predictive of children's school readiness and cognitive outcomes, such as teacher-child interactions and instructional support.<sup>18</sup> This would entail that QRIS programs establish quality indicators and best practices for ECE educators where data can be gathered, analyzed, and used to improve classroom practices to meet culturally and linguistically diverse children's needs. Some examples, suggested by the BUILD Initiative, include examining whether materials in classrooms meet the needs of minority children, home language is used to communicate with children and families, and staff receive ongoing training on racial bias and meeting the needs of culturally diverse children.<sup>19,20</sup>

**Funders.** Funders can support QRIS and quality enhancement activities of ECE programs that target ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minorities. Funders can also create quality enhancement funds that support specific aspects of QRIS and programs in the systems. Part of the funds can be used for mental health services for children, families, and educators, as well as training for educators. Funders can support the development of other aspects of QRIS, such as helping programs become licensed and accredited through capital grants to improve the structure of the programs and materials, as well as support staff to become more educated through scholarships and increases in salary once they receive certification or a higher degree (i.e., retention bonus). Funders can contribute to the state of knowledge about QRIS through funding research that



examines the impact of QRIS and quality initiatives focused on poor, minority, and children from immigrant families, and early education programs and educators that serve them. As noted by CLASP regarding use of child care and immigrant families, funders can provide resources to immigrant-serving organizations to increase their capacity to engage in and support child care and early education through direct services and resource and referral, as well as information to constituent groups. Studies show that English proficiency is related to family well-being and child outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Thus, funding can be focused on supporting translation services and English-as-a-Second Language courses, which are likely to strengthen home-school partnership and ensure that parents are able to support and advocate for their children.

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- <sup>3</sup> Hernandez DJ. Demographic change and the life circumstances of immigrant families. *The Future of Children*. 2004;14(2):17-47.
- <sup>4</sup> Children who are Dual Language Learners acquire two or more languages simultaneously, and learn a second language while continuing to develop their first language. The term "dual language learners" encompasses other terms frequently used, such as Limited English Proficient (LEP), bilingual, English language learners (ELL), English learners, and children who speak a Language Other Than English (LOTE) (Office of Head Start).
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