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What Do Parents Want From Preschool? Perspectives of Low-Income Latino/a Immigrant Families

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Abstract

With a qualitative approach drawing from four focus groups, this study explored what aspects of preschool are valued most by 30 low-income Latino/a immigrant parents with children enrolled in a state-funded preschool program in Texas. Beyond the push and pull factors of necessity, convenience, and supply, parents reported valuing the responsiveness of schools to families' needs and concerns, the provision of a safe and developmentally appropriate environment, the role of preschool in both care and education, the incorporation of parents within the school, and the school's capacity for developing parents' human and navigational capital. Even though parents saw great value in preschool preparing their children for school and helping themselves as parents, there was also fear and mistrust in neighborhood schools that was rooted in discrimination and long-term educational inequality.

Keywords

preschool; children of Latino/a immigrant parents; focus groups

The Latino/a population in the U.S. has accounted for more than half of the country's population growth from 2000 to 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2016). Although many Latino/a children are born in the U.S., roughly 35% are born to immigrant families in which

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one or both parents are foreign-born (Pew Research Center, 2016). As a result of these changing demographics, the U.S. educational system has experienced a surge in the number of children from Latino/a immigrant families entering school for the first time. For many children of immigrants, however, formal schooling begins prior to kindergarten, with around six in ten enrolled in some form of formal early childhood education (ECE) arrangement in the year before kindergarten (Ansari, 2017). Such critical ECE experiences in this important population deserve attention (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007).

Like many other parents in the U.S., Latino/a immigrant parents must navigate a wide array of ECE arrangements—including informal care (e.g., relative and non-relative care) or more formal center-based programs, like preschool—that have different implications for preparing children for kindergarten (Phillips et al., 2017). Unlike non-Latino/a families, however, Latino/a immigrant parents must navigate the ECE market while also adapting to life in the U.S., which poses a number of challenges and, therefore, makes this group of families important to study. Indeed, despite the potential academic benefits of more formal ECE programs, the children of Latino/a immigrant parents have been historically less likely than their non-Latino/a White peers to be enrolled in formal ECE (Ansari, 2017; Hernández, Denton, & Macartney, 2007; Vesely & Ginsberg, 2011). Even with the rapid growth in the Latino/a population (Pew Research Center, 2016), why Latino/a families are less likely to enroll their children in formal ECE programs has remained contested, and we have limited knowledge about parents' experiences in navigating the ECE market along with the experiences of their children in ECE programs once they are enrolled (Crosnoe, Bonazzo, & Wu, 2015).

To help fill in these gaps in knowledge, we situate our work within the accommodations model developed by Meyers and Jordan (2006) to address a set of interrelated research questions that have been central to contemporary issues of educational research and policy surrounding the care and education of children from Latino/a immigrant families. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to organize and analyze four qualitative focus-group sessions with 30 low-income Latino/a immigrant parents of children enrolled in a single state-funded preschool program in Texas, we were able to elucidate information on a variety of aspects of ECE that Latino/a immigrant parents value beyond the push and pull factors of necessity, convenience, and supply that are generally theorized as driving the selection of ECE arrangements. Studying the beliefs and values of parents who have already used ECE is an important empirical endeavor because doing so can help identify what factors most promote ECE enrollment among this population. As such, the results of this study can be leveraged for the development of culturally appropriate practices and policies geared toward increasing preschool enrollment of Latino/a children from low-income and immigrant families in the future, especially in conjunction with larger-scale studies that build off this exploratory one.

The Accommodations Model of ECE Selection

The accommodations model developed by Meyers and Jordan (2006) contends that parents' decisions regarding their children's ECE are not a fully informed choice but rather reflect

the different ways that parents navigate the opportunities and constraints they face as a result of their cultural and social contexts, individual capacities, and circumstances. In general, four factors are hypothesized to drive the selection of ECE arrangements: family necessity, family resources, broader community systems, and cultural norms and preferences. Notably, family necessity, resources, and community systems are more economically-oriented factors in the selection of ECE arrangements, whereas cultural norms and preferences speak more to the aspects of ECE that parents, especially those who have recently immigrated to the U.S., may look for above and beyond necessity, convenience, and supply.

To begin, parents' decisions regarding ECE enrollment is made within the broader context of family circumstances that reflect family necessity (e.g., maternal employment and work schedules) and family resources (e.g., income, social networks, and systemic connections; Coley, Votruba-Drzal, Collins, & Miller, 2014; Crosnoe, Purtell, Davis-Kean, Ansari & Benner, 2016; Singer, Fuller, Keiley, & Wolf, 1998; Vesely, 2013). These two aspects of the accommodations framework largely determine what parents need for care as well as the information that they have about care options. The third driver of ECE selection in the accommodations framework is the broader community system, including the supply and demand for ECE and parental perceptions of the ECE options in their neighborhoods (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). Greater community demand for ECE often leads to more and better options in the ECE market (Gordon & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Speaking again to convenience and necessity, parents often select ECE arrangements that are readily available to them and meet their aforementioned needs (Crosnoe, Purtell et al., 2016; Coley et al., 2014; Gordon & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). That is, parents may rely on informal care arrangements and forgo certain ECE arrangements like preschool if there are no such options (or good options) available to them or if they are unaware of other ECE opportunities that they could access.

The cultural traditions and processes of families and their communities, the fourth factor in the accommodations model, can also influence individual-level processes, such as the selection of ECE arrangements. These processes are particularly relevant for Latino/a immigrant families (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). To date, much of the debate over the under-enrollment of Latino/a children in ECE has been attributed to parents' desires for culturally responsive caregivers and cultural matches between home and school (Fuller & García Coll, 2010; García Coll et al., 2002; Sandstrom et al., 2012). Such preferences may narrow the pool of available options that Latino/a immigrant families have. The impact of cultural factors, however, is not restricted to parents' preferences for ECE or how parents evaluate their opportunities; cultural factors also capture parents' familiarity with the U.S. educational system and their knowledge of the values placed on their children's ECE participation (Crosnoe, Ansari, Purtell, & Wu, 2016; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Ultimately, the cultural aspect of the accommodations model taps into parents' preferences, knowledge, and how they evaluate their opportunities.

These challenges and differences in parents' beliefs and desires that may be rooted in culture are only part of the narrative. In fact, although there are racial/ethnic disparities in ECE enrollment (Child Trends, 2016), recent national studies have found that Latino/a families with young children demonstrate similar preferences as their non-Latino/a White and Black

peers for formal ECE over informal care (Crosby, Mendez, Guzman, & López, 2016; Guzman, Hickman, Turner, Gennetian, 2016). If these national trends hold true, then the ECE enrollment gap may have little to do with what Latino/a parents actually want in and value about ECE and have more to do with structural (Ansari, 2017) and cultural (Brandon, 2004; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Liang, Fuller, & Singer, 2000) barriers. Reflecting these national trends, other researchers have found that Latina mothers are willing to make sacrifices for their young children to ensure their educational success, but the sacrifices they make reflect their cultural values and beliefs that may not be as valued in U.S. schools (Ramos, 2014).

What Parents' Value about ECE

Although the accommodations model has identified factors that lead parents to select ECE or not (e.g., Coley et al., 2014; Crosnoe, Purtell et al., 2016; Miller, Votruba-Drzal, & Coley, 2013; Johnson, Padilla, & Votruba-Drzal, 2017), including factors associated with Latino/a parents' selection behaviors (Ansari, 2017), how and what parents value about their ECE arrangement after selection occurs is less clear (for related studies see: Guzman et al., 2016; Vesely, 2013). *In other words, parents may come to value aspects of the ECE arrangement they select that are above and beyond (or are different from) the factors that drove them to enroll their children in that particular setting.* Put another way, understanding what parents perceive to be important features of ECE arrangements after their children are enrolled may provide a more accurate assessment of how parents come into contact with these programs and what aspects of these arrangements matter most to families in the long-run (and what they pass through to others in their community networks; see Crosnoe et al., 2015). Such an assessment could, in turn, support the development of informational interventions as a means of increasing the enrollment of children of Latino/a immigrants and other underserved populations.

Given the importance of early childhood enrichment for long-term trajectories through the K-12 system and beyond (Heckman, 2006; Phillips et al., 2017; Reardon, 2011), one aspect of an ECE program that parents likely value most is how it prepares children for kindergarten (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005). For various reasons, however, many parents have trouble ascertaining the degree to which a child's ECE program is meeting that goal, even if they are adept at figuring how that program is serving that child's other kinds of needs (e.g., safety, well-being; Bassok, Markowitz, Player, & Zagardo, 2017). Despite these troubles, effective preschool programs are likely to share common elements that are indicative of a high-quality environment, namely teaching to support children's development and learning, planning and adapting curriculum, and assessing children's development (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2017). To the extent that ECE programs facilitate children's development (Phillips et al., 2017) and parents can accurately gauge and evaluate these different aspects of ECE environments, then it may very well be that what parents end up valuing is quite different from their accommodations used to select their children's arrangements.

Studying the experiences of Latino/a immigrant families also requires recognition of the fact that ECE programs are likely one of the very first institutions in the U.S. with which they

have daily interactions and thus serve a crucial role in families' lives (Clarke-Stewart & Allhusen, 2005; Vesely, 2013; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). That is, beyond the services for children, another indicator of a high-quality environment is an ECE program's ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with families (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2017). In order to do so, programs must be sensitive to family composition, language, and culture (Crosnoe, 2010; García & Jensen, 2009) and support parents, develop their human capital, and help them navigate various institutions (Yosso, 2005; Vesely, Ewaida, & Kearney, 2013). In this way, ECE programs with a two-generation approach may help Latino/a immigrant parents adjust to a new culture in the U.S. Although a growing literature has found that these relationships are more easily established when ECE providers speak the same language and are sensitive to families' cultural backgrounds (Halgunseth, 2009; Vesely & Ginsberg, 2011), other nuances of this relationship-building remain unclear (Crosnoe et al., 2015).

Study Aims and Questions

One innovative approach to understanding what matters most to individuals on a given topic is IP A, which is an emerging methodology that borrows from both phenomenological traditions of attending to the way things appear to individuals in their experiences and hermeneutic traditions of translating and interpreting those experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The aim of IP A is to investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences in a given context (Palmer et al. 2010) by *giving voice* to the things that matter most to them—through first-person accounts of stories, thoughts, and feelings about a given phenomenon—and *making sense* of these matters (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith, 2004). In the context of ECE experiences among Latino/a immigrant families, IPA has the potential to *give voice* to parents regarding what they value most about their ECE experiences so that we may compare parents' expressed values with ECE driving factors laid out by Meyers and Jordan (2006) in the accommodations model. Thus, this study aims to build on prior research on the accommodations model (Ansari, 2017; Coley et al., 2014; Crosnoe, Purtell et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2017) by addressing two research questions: how do Latino/a immigrant parents come into contact with ECE programs and what factors do they value in an ECE arrangement?

To address these questions, we situate our work within the accommodations model developed by Meyers and Jordan (2006) and apply IPA to qualitative data from four focus groups to build and deepen that model's insights for Latino/a immigrant parents. IPA, as opposed to other forms of qualitative data analysis, is particularly suited for addressing our research aims in that it is focused on the ways in which participants experience a specific phenomenon—in this case what parents value about preschool—while also attending to the situations and conditions surrounding this phenomenon. Even Although IPA is intended to capture a more detailed exploration of personal experiences and, thus, is most often applied to the analysis of individual interview data, IPA applied to focus group data allows for the examination of (a) sensitive personal experiences, (b) shared understandings of these experiences among participants, and (c) the ways in which broader contextual factors color these experiences, which may—in turn—stimulate using focus groups for IPA methodology can be particularly beneficial when: (a) examining personal experiences that are sensitive,

(b) attempting to tap into shared understandings, and (c) studying the implications of broader contextual factors. That is, these lived experiences that IPA brings to light can not only be preserved in the context of focus groups, but focus groups can also stimulate greater discussion and open up new perspectives that would otherwise not be possible in an individual interview setting (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009). The focus group format—when taken together, IPA and the —as opposed to individual semi-structured interviews—was preferred for several reasons. First, focus group methodology data are especially suited for IPA ideal combination as they in that it s encourages allow participants to become to become aware of or clarify their own views on a topic by listening to the views of other study participants (Morgan & Krueger, 1993), which can , in turn, . Second, given the format, group discussions may elicit more experiential reflection and produce greater insight on individual's experiences the subject matter than individual interviews (Palmer et al., 2010). Third, And, ultimately, because focus groups create a safe space in which individuals with similar experiences come together to voice their opinions, this has the potential to empower participants from both low-income and/or minority ethnic communities—who might otherwise be reluctant to participate—may feel more empowered to share their experiences (Plaut, Landis, & Trevor, 1993; Rabiee, 2004; Wilkinson, 1998) that can be highlighted through the IPA methodology., thus enriching our analyses.

Method

Research Site and Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment efforts began after the research team received Institutional Review Board approval. Parents were recruited from a state-funded preschool program—referred to here as the Mariposa Early Childhood Center (a pseudonym)—to participate in this study. Mariposa, located in a large city in Texas, is an early childhood dual-language program serving roughly 250 pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students (roughly 55% of the students were pre-kindergarteners). We targeted this center because: (a) it was built by the city public school system to serve as a demonstration program for other pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs and teachers across the district; (b) its enrollees came from a large number of neighborhoods in the county; and (c) it was built to serve the districts most at-risk children (over 85% of families identified as Latino/a, nearly 60% of children identified as English Language Learners; over 95% of children were eligible for free/reduced lunch). For these reasons, Mariposa represents a unique opportunity to understand what works, what does not, and why.

Parents were eligible to take part in the study if they were of Latino/a-origin and had a 4-year-old child enrolled in Mariposa during the 2015-2016 school year. They were recruited into the study through letters (provided both in Spanish and English) describing the study that were sent home with eligible children in the center and included a number to call if parents were interested. These letters were distributed by the parent support specialist at the program. This strategy resulted in a final sample of 30 Latino/a participants; 27 mothers, two fathers, and one grandmother who was her grandchild's primary guardian along with her son. Although 32 parents agreed to participate, only 30 attended a focus group. Because: (a) 29 of the 30 participants were their child's biological parent, we refer to them as parents for

simplicity and (b) the center serve almost exclusively children eligible for free/reduced lunch, we classify our sample as low-income.

Overall, the sample represented the parents of roughly 25% of the Latino/a pre-kindergarteners served at Mariposa. As shown in Table 1, participants averaged a little over 36 years of age ($SD = 7.12$), and most were immigrants: 10% were born in the U.S., 80% were born in Mexico, and 10% were born in another Latin American country (e.g., Honduras, El Salvador). Additionally, almost all participants lived with a partner (57% were married and 40% were cohabitating) and averaged less than a high school education ($M = 10.10$ years of schooling; $SD = 3.32$). Roughly six in 10 of the study participants (57%) were also unemployed outside of the home (for a breakdown of sample descriptive statistics by focus group sessions, see Table 1).

Data Collection

Four focus groups of 5-10 participants were conducted with parents at the Mariposa Early Childhood Center for 90-120 minutes between March and April of 2016. Focus groups were scheduled in the mornings on different days of the week to ensure focus group size and to accommodate parent's schedules. At the beginning of each session, parents were provided consent forms that were explained verbally and read to them in their language of preference. Then, parents completed a paper questionnaire, provided in both Spanish (93%) and English (7%), that included questions about the demographic characteristics of their family, their child care preferences (based on questions from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort; Snow et al., 2009), and their children's current child care providers (based on questions from the National Survey of Early Care and Education; National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team, 2015). After all parents completed the questionnaires, focus group discussions commenced. All focus groups were conducted in Spanish by the fifth author, who was fluent in both English and Spanish and had prior experience facilitating focus groups. The guide for the focus group moderator was developed in English by the first and third author and iteratively edited to ensure that it was clear and concise. These materials were then translated into Spanish by a bilingual research assistant and back-translated into English. The fifth author who moderated each of the sessions also reviewed each of these documents and edited them as necessary to ensure clarity and accessibility.

Focus groups examined parents' underlying motivations for enrolling their children in preschool, with focus group sessions beginning with questions asking participants to describe their preschool search experiences (e.g., *When did you begin searching for your child's current caregiver? Why did you choose this arrangement?*) and to discuss any challenges they experienced in their search for preschool (e.g., *What were the specific challenges you faced in your search for center care or preschool? What surprised you the most when you were looking for the type of care you wanted?*). Focus group questions then turned to parents' perceptions of their children's current preschool arrangement as a means of capturing what parents most valued about their children's preschool experiences (e.g., *What role do child care programs play in preparing children for school? What role do parents play in preparing children for school?*). Finally, these sessions closed with a discussion of what advice parents would give to other families who were starting to look for

a child care or preschool program for their children as a means of capturing any remaining topics that were not discussed earlier in the session. Although these questions guided the discussions, the facilitator had flexibility to explore other topics that emerged among the parents. At the end of each session, participants were provided with a \$25 gift card to a local grocery store chain to thank them for taking part in the focus group.

Although there are various methods for determining the number of participants and focus groups necessary to achieve saturation, we used the repetition of themes, such that (a) no new themes or additional information emerged by the end of the final focus group session, (b) further coding was no longer feasible, and (c) there was enough information to replicate the study (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). The research team also employed data triangulation methods through comparison of field memos from multiple research observers and the focus group moderator after each focus group to help determine when saturation had been reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data Analysis

IPA (Smith, 1996) adapted for facilitated focus group data (de Visser & Smith, 2007; Lamb & Cogan, 2016; Palmer et al. 2010) was the primary method of data analysis. Although IPA does not prescribe a single method for working with qualitative data, we used the traditional iterative IPA methodology (Lamb & Cogan, 2016; Smith et al., 2009).

To begin, the first and second authors performed close, line-by-line coding of a single focus group transcript by hand to capture the experiential claims, concerns, and understandings of each focus group participant (Palmer et al., 2010). After this initial coding, the first and second authors determined an initial set of emergent subthemes. Given this initial set of emergent subthemes, the first and second authors recoded the first focus group transcript and then continued to code the remaining three focus group transcripts using Nvivo qualitative coding software (QSR International, 2015). After each focus group was coded, the first and second authors reconvened to discuss the adaptation of addition of emergent themes.

Next, the first and second authors interrogated the emergent themes to make relevant connections to form a set of superordinate themes (Lamb & Cogan, 2016; Smith & Osborn, 2003), which were then clustered into two domains (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), namely how parents came about enrolling their children in Mariposa and what features of the program parents indicated valuing in their preschool experiences. The domain of how parents came about enrolling their children in Mariposa included the clustered superordinate themes of (a) social networks, (b) cultural and community factors, and (c) responsiveness of school to family necessity, resources, and supply and was deductively imposed given the original research questions. The domain of what features of the program parents indicated valuing in the preschool experiences emerged from the data and included the clustered superordinate themes of (d) provision of a safe, developmentally appropriate environment, (e) ECE as more than child care, (f) incorporation of parents within the school, and (g) the school's capacity for developing parents' navigational capital. For a list of clustered superordinate themes and accompanying subthemes, see Table 2. Importantly, our focus was on the emergent superordinate themes that resonated across each of the sessions that captured both why parents enrolled their children in Mariposa and what parents reported

valuing about the program. We then situated these themes within the broader accommodations framework.

Data Quality

To ensure that these data were of high quality, we relied on a number of strategies for data collection and analyses. The first was the triangulation of investigators. A Spanish-speaking research assistant and the fifth author, who facilitated each of the sessions and was a native Spanish speaker, helped interpret the interview data and notes from a cultural perspective ensuring that the authors' interpretations were accurate. This type of verification is especially important given that the audio recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim in Spanish and then professionally translated to English. As is often the case, the translation of data from one language to another can distort the meaning of parents' experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005). Thus, this verification and triangulation helped to ensure that the data were not misinterpreted. Second, as part of the data analysis, each of the transcripts were independently double-coded by the first and second author through a central coding scheme that was based on emergent themes discussed above. When there were inconsistencies, the two researchers met and reached an agreement on the appropriate code, resulting in 100% agreement for all codes assigned to the data. Finally, the first author met regularly with the third and fifth authors during the course of data collection and analyses to discuss what was learned during the focus group interviews with the parents at Mariposa as well as the interpretation of the data gathered. The third and fifth authors provided regular feedback regarding the first author's interpretation of the data.

Results

The Latino/a immigrant parents in our study indicated a number of reasons why they selected the Mariposa Early Childhood Center and several aspects of the program that they valued. Although some themes that emerged illuminate extant components of the accommodations model's driving factors for selection into ECE arrangements, several points of discussion extend this model in new directions.

Parents' Selection of Mariposa

We begin with a presentation of the superordinate themes that referred to parents' selection of Mariposa and were in line with the accommodations model. We provide direct quotations from the study parents in order to give voice to these themes.

Social networks.—The vast majority of the study parents reported that they relied on their social networks (e.g., family and friends), neighborhood institutions, and their own personal experiences for information about the center, which taps into the family resources component of the accommodations model. One parent, for example, explained how she “met a friend that had her daughter [at Mariposa] and would always mention this school, that it was a good school, and since then I decided that my son will be here at this school” (Participant 1, Focus Group 1).

Parents reported that they also came into contact with information about the center through the various institutions with which they interacted. For example, parents reported receiving information about the center from their other children's schools, from the local YMCA or other non-profit programs in which parents were enrolled, and from posters advertising the center outside of "the [grocery store] and in the laundromat" (Participant 3, Focus Group 1). These organizations geared toward providing Latino/a immigrant families with child-related information and services brought parents into contact with Mariposa. For example, a number of parents across the sessions reported having previously taken "a class to focus parents on pre-K" (Participant 1, Focus Group 2) sponsored by the YMCA that was located at Mariposa before enrolling their children in the program. In these ways, families, friends, and institutions that provided parents with information about the program gave legitimacy to idea of ECE, and Mariposa in particular, as an important and necessary part of their children's education.

Cultural and community factors.—At the same time, the less favorable experiences of families and friends—as well as parents' own experiences with their older children—in other neighborhood schools also provided parents with valuable information that potentially steered them toward Mariposa. For example, a number of parents reported that they purposely avoided their neighborhood schools because their neighborhoods had "the worst schools" (Participant 4, Focus Group 2).

Many of these feelings were rooted in the belief that the best schools with the most resources were in parts of the city that were inaccessible to parents at Mariposa because of distance (reflecting access) or their ethnicity (reflecting culture). One parent discussed another highly regarded ECE program in the city that had received an award for academic excellence that would have been an excellent place for her child. She lamented that not only was the school too far, but "the majority [of students there] are American" and that Latino/a immigrant families like hers were often tethered to the schools "where the Hispanics are that don't have a good reputation" (Participant 3, Focus Group 2). Parents were cognizant of the fact that educational resources were distributed unequally across the city, often along ethnic lines. This recognition seemed to shape parents' motivations to enroll their children at Mariposa.

Parents similarly cited past experiences with other schools in which teachers and staff were disrespectful to them, which several parents attributed to discrimination; in fact, a number of parents noted that teachers and staff in other schools often assumed that, because they were Latino/a, they would not understand English. As one parent explained:

I have gone to some [other schools where] the teachers have mocked me. I don't know if it's because we are Hispanic, but they criticize you, or they give you a mean look. (Participant 1, Focus Group 3).

Thus, as outlined by the accommodations model (Meyers & Jordan, 2006), parents were driven away or excluded from other ECE options because of cultural and structural barriers and were largely enrolling their children into Mariposa as a result of the experiences of their family, friends, and their own encounters with schools and other larger institutional forces.

Responsiveness to family necessity, resources, and supply.—Despite the role of broader community constraints and social networks in their decision-making, almost all parents reported valuing the responsiveness of Mariposa to families’ unique sets of constraints regarding family necessity, resources, and supply—representing several of the other driving factors in ECE selection as outlined by Meyers and Jordan (2006). In other words, parents potentially valued and were driven to enroll in ECE programs that had the ability to meet their needs.

Transportation is a good example that illustrates the responsiveness of the school to parents’ needs and wants. Many of the students at Mariposa came from families without private cars and needed to be bused to school. Mariposa students rode a school bus that picked them up from their neighborhood schools and took them to the Mariposa campus in the morning and returned them to their neighborhood schools for pick-up at the end of the school day. Having a busing system allowed families to expand their ECE options outside of their immediate neighborhoods, thus speaking to the supply and demand aspect of the accommodations model.

Parents also noted that having a school bus that took their children back to their neighborhood schools at the end of the day was helpful because parents could pick up all of their children—their child who attended Mariposa and their older children who attended the neighborhood school—at one convenient location and at the same time. One parent explained:

I have my son in the other school, [so] I had to make the decision to send him on the bus [to Mariposa] for them to bring him back on the bus, because it was a bit difficult for me to bring them both and for both to arrive on time (Participant 5, Focus Group 1).

Roughly two thirds of parents reported having multiple school-aged children. The fact that Mariposa picked up at local schools meant that parents could drop off and pick up all of their children at the same time, which was important for parents whose work schedules would not “give them permission” to pick up children at different times during the work day (Participant 5, Focus Group 3). Mariposa also accommodated parents by partnering with local organizations like the YMCA to provide after school care for “working moms [so they could] leave their kids after school” (Participant 7, Focus Group 1).

In these ways, the center was able to address family resource factors related to families not having personal transportation, family necessity factors related to being able to drop off and pick up all children at times and locations that accommodated their work schedules, and supply-related factors related to having child care options not limited to a family’s neighborhood.

Parents’ Experiences at Mariposa

Despite the various constraints experienced by families, parents reported that “even if [Mariposa] were far, [they’d] still come” (Participant 2, Focus Group 3) and that it was “worth it making the effort” sending their children to Mariposa (Participant 6, Focus Group 1). This overall appreciation for the center was manifest in several themes, which build and

deepen the accommodations (Meyers & Jordan, 2006) model's insights for Latino/a immigrant parents.

Provision of a safe and developmentally appropriate school environment.—All but one study parent highlighted school safety measures as essential to their satisfaction with Mariposa. They would often juxtapose their perceptions of their other children's elementary schools with Mariposa, especially in regards to safety and developmental appropriateness. Their children's other schools seemed disorganized, big, and impersonal, which led children to “always [feel] stressed] and always afraid” (Participant 2, Focus Group 3). They thought that the Mariposa teachers and staff, however, had many procedures in place to alleviate these concerns.

For example, parents were extremely impressed with the security of the school and the school's protocols for ensuring child safety. One parent who drove her child to and from school, for example, explained the procedures for picking children up from school:

The children have a number—they put a number on their backpack. They give you a number...if you don't have the paper they will not give you your child. You must prove that, well, that you are the parent (Participant 4, Focus Group 1).

Another parent commented that the extent of the school's organization and attention to children quelled their fears about child safety:

The number's on the back of [the] backpack with a color. And if you go by [the] truck it has a different color. And the phone number of the school is on it, the home phone number, [and] the name of the child (Participant 6, Focus Group 2).

Not only did parents feel more at ease with these safety measures, but so did children. Parents suggested that the safe environment of the school was, as a result, “a very calm environment” in which children felt “more secure” and was a place where they “saw more tranquility than in the elementary school” (Participant 1, Focus Group 3). The safety of the school was, according to parents, important for reducing both parent and child stress relating to school.

Focus group parents across each of the sessions were similarly impressed by the newness and cleanliness of the preschool facilities and the fact that the entire campus was designed to address the needs of young children. For example, one parent noted that the center was “the only school that I have seen that is decorated and designed especially for little kids” (Participant 3, Focus Group 1). Parents were effusive in their praise of the fact that the school was “child-friendly [and] just made for kids,” (Participant 4, Focus Group 2) with everything just “their size [so that] everything [is] accessible for them” (Participant 3, Focus Group 1). Upon further reflection, however, it became clear that this aspect of the program resonated with parents because many were worried about bullying in other schools, whereas in Mariposa “there weren't bigger kids to scare or bully their young ones” (Participant 5, Focus Group 3). For these reasons, parents seemed to value the center for providing the safe, developmentally appropriate environment to which they felt at ease sending their children.

Preschool as more than child care.—Across sessions, one key issue was how much parents viewed preschool as both a form of child care and an educational investment. They frequently discussed how they needed care that fit their schedules, but what was just as important was that these programs also provided their children with an enriched learning environment. Indeed, over two-thirds of parents reported that ECE programs played an important role in developing their children’s academic and socioemotional skills that they found essential for later success, such as counting skills and the development of routines (e.g., early bed and rise times, and schedule consistency).

For example, one mother reported that, because of preschool, she felt confident that her child would “not start kinder[garten] with his eyes closed” (Participant 6, Focus Group 1). This sentiment was not unusual; a number of parents across each of the sessions were aware of their children’s academic progress and frequently remarked that their children who were currently enrolled in preschool were considerably more “advanced” as compared with older siblings, cousins, and friends who had not attended preschool. Indeed, six parents across the four focus groups used the word “advanced” to describe their children in comparison to other children and to themselves when they were young children. As one mother noted:

I’m going to tell you something. I have two children in second grade. And it’s not that I say that school is bad, or I know that the school, well, is good, but... [my second graders] don’t read the same as [my pre-kindergartener enrolled at Mariposa] reads... I see my children in second grade and I see my daughter here, and I say, ‘Such a difference, so much, so much.’ (Participant 1, Focus Group 2).

Parents also emphasized the socioemotional development of their children during their time spent at preschool. They repeatedly discussed the role of preschool in teaching children respect, discipline, and order—skills that, they believed, were undervalued in the U.S. educational system, but were skills that would set the stage for children’s long-term success. In response to one parent noting how children were taught that, “if they don’t like something [to] say ‘Stop. I don’t like this’” (Participant 4, Focus Group 4), another parent added that this technique was a way to “handle situations without violence” (Participant 6, Focus Group 4).

Parents also referred to the ways in which children reinforced these skills at home. For example, one mother shared that her son had learned breathing techniques at school for managing his own emotions and:

Makes me breathe—he makes me do it. Sometimes he sees that I am sad, or crying, or something, and he tells me ‘Breathe. Breathe.’ He practices. They take home what they learn [at school] (Participant 3, Focus Group 4).

A second parent shared that her child talked about going to a “safe place” (Participant 3, Focus Group 3) in the classroom when he was upset or distressed and that he would use similar methods at home. Other parents across the sessions echoed appreciation for the emotion regulation skills taught at the program and identified conflict resolution skills as particularly important skills that—according to parents that had experience with other settings—were not always taught in other ECE programs, or even during the primary grades.

When taken together, the study parents believed that Mariposa was preparing their children for kindergarten and viewed preschool as being qualitatively different from child care.

Incorporation of parents within the school.—Beyond the educational opportunities provided to children, the vast majority of parents also seemed to value the ways in which Mariposa incorporated them within the program. Parent incorporation took several forms, but parents were most vocal about feeling welcome at the school and frequently communicating with their children’s teachers and school staff. Respectful and frequent communication was something that parents wanted, received, and valued in their preschool experience that contributed to their comfort with and adjustment to sending their children to Mariposa. One parent explained her preferences for parent-teacher communication when she said, “there should always be communication. You always want to know what your children are doing, how they’re doing, who their teacher is, and how they behave in class” (Participant 3, Focus Group 2).

Parents reported various ways in which Mariposa teachers and staff communicated with parents, including by text message, by phone calls, by weekly summaries or classroom newsletters sent home, by email, and through Facebook groups. Parents were also encouraged to contact teachers if they “have a doubt [about] something, [to] not hesitate to call or send a message” (Participant 2, Focus Group 1).

Above all else, parents spoke about feeling welcomed at the school, being greeted and respected by all staff, and being invited to participate in various activities at the center. The experience of feeling welcome and respected at Mariposa was in stark contrast with parents’ past experiences with other schools, as previously noted. For example, one parent explained that

The personnel are very friendly with you. I have other older children, and they went to another school. And there, at times you passed [a staff member] and you didn’t know if it was a parent or if it was another teacher because [they say] nothing [to you], not even good morning or even how are you, nothing. And here... everyone’s very friendly, all the personnel (Participant 4, Focus Group 3).

Another way in which the Mariposa program incorporated parents in the school and their children’s learning process was by asking parents about what they felt were skills their children should know or needed extra help practicing. One parent explained:

[The teachers] give me a paper and they tell me to write on here what it is that you think your child needs more help with, so I wrote his name with the two last names needs a little more focus on... if I see that my son does not pronounce his ‘S’s’ well, I tell them, ‘I need help with his pronunciations.’ [The teacher] sees what we write down and...focus[es] on that” (Participant 6, Focus Group 1).

In addition to soliciting information from parents on their preferences, Mariposa staff also allowed parents to opt in to special types of classrooms that fit their cultural preferences and their children’s needs. For example, one parent mentioned that, “there are also many options. There are classes of only English, dual [language] classes, special education,... speech therapy..., occupational therapy... it doesn’t matter the need... everyone is treated the

same” (Participant 1, Focus Group 3). Another parent described how Mariposa staff asked parents if they wanted their children to learn both English and Spanish in school. In these ways, parents felt that they were partners in their children’s education and that their children’s needs—and their preferences as parents—were being met. One parent put it best when she said, at Mariposa, “everybody is involved all over” (Participant 4, Focus Group 2).

School’s facilitation of the development of navigational capital.—A final reoccurring theme had to do with the school’s ability to assist families. All parents who participated in the focus groups indicated greatly valuing the role of schools in facilitating the formation of navigational capital, which refers to parents’ skills and abilities to maneuver through various institutions (Yosso, 2005)—such as the U.S. education system—and other processes like child rearing. The parents at Mariposa saw the school as a site at which teachers and staff “guide you, they help you, and if you don’t understand, they explain it to you” (Participant 1, Focus Group 3). Parents valued the fact that they could ask for and receive resources for supporting their children and strengthening their own parenting practices, thus boosting their ability to navigate both being a parent and educating their young children.

Mariposa also made a concerted effort to develop parents’ human and navigational capital by providing them with opportunities to attend school-related workshops, such as classes on child development and English language classes. The center often provided reading materials for families that they could take home to reinforce skills acquired in workshops. Over two-thirds of parents used such school-provided resources. For example, one parent commented that teachers and staff provided them with “reading classes” that “explain[ed] to [parents] how to read to [their children], gave [parents] books so that [they could] take it home,” and helped parents develop “reading strategies” for reinforcing literacy skills with their children (Participant 2, Focus Group 3). Parents who identified themselves as having limited English proficiency discussed how they were provided books and literacy materials in both English and Spanish so that they could “follow up with the books, in English and in Spanish,” regardless of whether they themselves spoke English (Participant 5, Focus Group 4).

Mariposa parents placed great value on opportunities for involvement in the center and believed that this involvement translated into changes in their own behavior at home. For example, one mother remarked that, “There are moments in which I am not sure how to talk to my son; they [the teachers and staff] help me here” (Participant 1, Focus Group 1). That is, parents largely agreed that being a parent was hard, with one parent stating the general sentiment that “nobody is born knowing how to be parents. So we start learning, and every child is different” (Participant 7, Focus Group 1). Mariposa parents seemed to value preschool for its ability to inform parents of what their children needed to know to be successful in schools in the U.S. beyond Mariposa, to give parents’ strategies for helping their children achieve that success, and to provide parents with childrearing advice.

Discussion

This study sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of low-income Latino/a immigrant families, a population that has been historically under-enrolled in ECE, in a publicly funded ECE program in the state of Texas (Child Trends, 2016; Magnuson et al., 2006). We took a qualitative approach in order to elaborate the results from existing quantitative literature (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989), to redress some existing shortcomings of the early childhood literature, and to enrich the insights of the accommodations framework. We frame our conclusions as a discussion of the themes that emerged from the focus groups, which underscore the experiences of low-income Latino/a immigrant families and their children and adds to the literature focused on understanding why gaps in ECE enrollment exist.

Our research questions concerned what factors parents value about their ECE arrangements and whether the factors that drive selection into ECE arrangements—as outlined by the accommodations model (Meyers & Jordan, 2006)—were the same factors that Mariposa parents valued in their preschool experience. The responses from parents were somewhat mixed. In general, however, we found that some characteristics were specific to their experiences as low-income families (e.g., transportation and lack of good alternatives) or as immigrant parents (e.g., acceptance of cultural and language diversity). In line with the work of Meyers and Jordan (2006), the parents who participated in our focus group sessions clearly relied heavily on their own social networks and other community institutions for information regarding ECE. Among the parents in the study, this information facilitated parents' ECE enrollment because their social networks of other family and friends had strong positive impressions of the Mariposa Early Childhood Center. The advice parents received from their social networks represented a useful decision-making short-cut in the selection of ECE. Still, we must acknowledge that such a heavy reliance on social networks can also reduce ECE access as it may limit information for parents as ECE consumers and potentially bias their views from the outset as that information is filtered through the cultural norms of parents' family and friends (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). When taken together, however, these results appear to indicate that parents' social networks are a powerful force in connecting parents with—or discouraging them from enrolling in—ECE programs and represent an important aspect of family resources and the accommodations model more generally that requires continued empirical attention.

Similar to a number of prior studies, the Latino/a immigrant families in this community also experienced a combination of structural (e.g., transportation, lack of good options) and cultural (e.g., discrimination, unequal distribution of resources) barriers to enrolling their children in preschool. These barriers also reflect the basic parameters of the accommodations framework outlined by Meyers and Jordan (2006). Issues of diversity and persistent inequality pose a serious challenge for communities and, therefore, when coupled with other studies, these findings underscore the risk of interpreting parents' decisions as expressions of their preferences. Many of the Latino/a immigrant parents who participated in our study wanted to enroll their children in the best early childhood programs in the community but found that those programs were not accessible to them. It is perhaps not

surprising then that the families at Mariposa greatly appreciated the center's attempts to ease these burdens.

Across focus groups, parents feared, and had great mistrust of, neighborhood schools. These feelings drove their selection of Mariposa in addition to their positive evaluations of it. Even though the Mariposa Early Childhood Program was able to accommodate parents' needs and address many of their fears, the parents in the study were apprehensive about educational inequality and the broader contextual factors that limited the educational opportunities for their young children. Parents often cited difficulties in transporting their children to and from the program, but many noted that this was a sacrifice they were willing to make to ensure their children had high quality schooling. Accordingly, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners should pay much closer attention to transportation and the ways in which preschool-aged children get to school as a way of reducing the barriers that exist in families' access to high quality ECE (see also, Gottfried, 2017).

Beyond the push and pull factors outlined by Meyers and Jordan (2006), the Latino/a immigrant parents at Mariposa desired an academically and socioemotionally enriching, safe, and developmentally appropriate environment for their young children. The parents who participated in these focus groups believed that preschool was not solely about "child care" but also a means of preparing their children for kindergarten, both academically and emotionally. In addition to needing child care while they worked or went to school, parents wanted their children in preschool because they perceived that they would be more ready for kindergarten as a result. Although these findings are certainly not unique to Latino/a immigrant families (e.g., Chaudry, 2004; Vesely, 2013; Sandstrom & Chaudry, 2012; Weber, 2011), they highlight that Latino/a families may be no different than their non-Latino/a counterparts in their desire for ECE. These findings thus speak to an ongoing debate in the literature regarding the underlying reasons why Latino/a parents are less likely to enroll their children in ECE than non-Latino/a families (e.g., Ansari, 2017; Galinsky, 1994; Radey & Brewster, 2007) and suggest that there was not a culture of reluctance to enroll their children in formal ECE programs. When coupled with some of the emerging quantitative studies in this area (e.g., Crosby, et al., 2016; Guzman et al., 2016; López et al., 2017; Vesley, 2013), these results help to debunk some of the long-held myths and beliefs about what Latino/a families want from ECE programs.

Parents at Mariposa also valued the center's capacity for developing their own human and navigational capital (see also: Yosso, 2005; Vesely et al., 2013). Although these findings are in stark contrast to a number of quantitative studies, which suggest that some Latino/a immigrant families are less likely to invest in their children's education than non-Latino/a White parents (Crosnoe, Ansari et al., 2016; Cheadle & Amato, 2011; Turney & Kao, 2009), they are in line with other qualitative work (García-Coll et al., 2002; McWayne et al., 2013; Ramos, 2014; Vesely et al., 2013). In fact, as a result of school-sanctioned activities and resources (e.g., parenting workshops, English language classes), the parents at Mariposa were of the belief that the program accommodated their needs for both care and education for their children, along with support for themselves as parents as they adapted to the U.S. educational system. Showing parents how the family can benefit from their children's ECE attendance can, therefore, be an effective recruitment strategy and bolster parents' beliefs in

the value of ECE more generally. When taken together, these findings suggest that the use of ECE may be one of the mechanisms through which immigrant families adjust to a new culture in the U.S., rather than a result of this adjustment. Put another way, despite the notion in the existing literature that families who have acculturated to the U.S. are more likely to enroll their children into ECE, what these results indicate is that ECE programs themselves may serve as acculturating institutions.

From implementing a transportation system for parents with many children to providing children with an enriched learning environment, Mariposa successfully met many of the needs of its families. Perhaps most germane to the lives of Latino/a immigrant families was the center's cultural responsiveness. All parents in the four focus groups emphasized the culturally competent resources at their disposal and the respectful teachers and staff at the center, which they found lacking in their neighborhood schools. At the very least, these findings suggest that, from a policy and programming standpoint, we must educate and hire bilingual staff and train them to recognize their own beliefs and biases to honor immigrant families' native languages and cultures. As U.S. schools become increasingly diverse both culturally and linguistically, engaging all families in the public education system will be a growing challenge that requires careful attention. But if schools can create environments that are empowering for minority families and help teachers and parents develop strength-based partnerships—like Mariposa had—then what these results suggest is that Latino/a immigrant families are willing to enroll ECE and participate in their children's education. In underscoring the eagerness of Latino/a immigrant families to be involved in their children education, these results also indicate that administrators and researchers must think more carefully about new and culturally sensitive ways in which to engage these families in order to establish meaningful connections to reduce the discontinuities that exist between the home and school.

Limitations and Conclusions

Although this qualitative investigation provides insight into Latino/a immigrant families' values and fears regarding ECE in the state of Texas, it also has several limitations. First, this investigation was based on a series of four focus group sessions with parents at a single large and publicly funded ECE program, which limits the transferability of the findings to other contexts. Despite the fact that this school serves largely Latino/a immigrant families from low-income neighborhoods, the experiences of these families are likely to qualitatively differ from other families in other ECE settings as a result of the resources available at the center. Continued community and research efforts are, therefore, necessary to understand families' experiences across different settings and states to ensure that these pattern of results hold across larger and more representative samples.

Second, our focus groups only captured the experiences of low-income Latino/a immigrant families who had already enrolled their children in preschool. It will also be important in future research to speak with parents in this community who chose to enroll their children in less formal arrangements, such as relative care or other informal care settings, because such empirical inquiry could provide a deeper understanding of the accommodations that these families require in order to enroll their children in formal ECE programs. As part of this

effort, it is equally important to consider the implications of dual-language programming, as it was clear from our work that this was greatly valued, but we unfortunately did not have a comparison group to make contrasts. Third, one of the disadvantages of focus groups is that participants may feel pressure to agree with the dominant view of the group, and outspoken individuals may dominate the focus group conversations. Although the former is hard to gauge, the latter was not an issue. Relatedly, because focus groups are self-selecting, they may not be representative of the larger population, which again speaks to the importance of continued qualitative and quantitative research in this area.

Fourth, this study focused on the experiences of Latino/a immigrant parents, but triangulating these experiences with those of teachers and staff regarding families' experiences and the resources available at school is an equally important future direction, which could provide their perceptions of families and their strategies for recruitment. Finally, future studies should consider the experiences of Latino/a immigrant parents from different countries. The parents in this study were largely of Mexican-origin. Although a few parents were born in other countries, based on their similar points of discussion, it appeared that their shared histories, region of origin, and the uniformity with which they were often treated by schools and in their communities (i.e., as "Latino/a" or "Hispanic") resulted in a shared identity. Parents' points of discussion, therefore, did not systemically differ as a function of their countries of birth. However, this lack of variation as a function of country of origin may simply reflect the fact that our study families were largely of Mexican-origin.

With these limitations and future directions in mind, this qualitative exploration of the experiences of Latino/a immigrant families in a large Texas city begins to debunk some longstanding myths about their desire for ECE and their engagement in their children's education. These results also begin to highlight the ways in which these families connected to the program and how the program was successful in engaging Latino/a immigrant families in their children's education. In doing so, these results helped identify the types of factors that should be considered in future quantitative studies that examine the enrollment gap between Latino/a children from immigrant homes and their non-Latino/a peers. Ultimately, the results from this investigation confirm that Latino/a immigrant families do value preschool and greatly value being involved in their children's education; that is, there was no culture of reluctance to participate or be involved in their young children's education. At the same time, however, these families were often restricted by access, discrimination, and the unequal provision of resources, all of which served as significant barriers to the types of family engagement expected by the mainstream U.S. educational system.

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Highlights

- Four focus groups explored the experiences of 30 Latino/a immigrant parents with their children's preschools
- Despite many structural and cultural barriers, parents were not reluctant to enroll their children in preschool
- Parents valued many aspects of the program, including its academic rigor and safety
- Parents also appreciated the center's investments in parents' human and navigational capital

Table 1.

Sample descriptives, separated by focus group session

	Overall	Focus Group			
		One	Two	Three	Four
Participant relationship to child					
Mother	0.90	0.90	0.89	0.83	0.83
Father	0.07	0.10	0.00	0.17	0.17
Grandmother	0.03	0.00	0.11	0.00	0.00
Participant age	36.07 (7.12)	35.80 (4.71)	40.89 (8.78)	29.20 (1.10)	35.00 (6.29)
Participant marital status					
Cohabiting	0.40	0.40	0.44	0.40	0.33
Married	0.57	0.60	0.44	0.60	0.67
Separated/widowed	0.03	0.00	0.11	0.00	0.00
Parent country of birth					
Mexico	0.80	1.00	0.78	0.60	0.67
United States	0.10	0.00	0.00	0.20	0.33
Honduras	0.07	0.00	0.11	0.20	0.00
El Salvador	0.03	0.00	0.11	0.00	0.00
Participant years of education	10.70 (3.32)	10.20 (2.90)	10.56 (3.57)	11.80 (4.49)	10.83 (3.25)
Participant employment status					
Employed	0.43	0.40	0.22	0.40	0.83
Unemployed	0.57	0.60	0.78	0.60	0.17
Participant enrolled in class	0.10	0.20	0.11	0.00	0.00
Number of children in the home	1.93 (0.74)	1.90 (0.74)	2.00 (0.87)	2.00 (0.71)	1.83 (0.75)
Gender of child at Mariposa					
Male	0.63	0.80	0.56	0.60	0.50
Female	0.37	0.20	0.44	0.40	0.50
Number of participants	30	10	9	5	6

Notes. Estimates correspond to means or proportions. Estimates in brackets correspond to standard deviations

Table 2.

Superordinate themes and subthemes

Clusters	Superordinate themes	Subthemes
Parents' selection of Mariposa	Social networks	ECE experiences of family and friends Institutional connections
	Cultural and community factors	Distrust of neighborhood ECE options Inequality of resources along ethnic lines Ethnic discrimination
	Responsiveness of school to family necessity, resources, and supply	Having multiple school-aged children Transportation Work-related constraints
Parents' experiences at Mariposa	Provision of a safe, developmentally appropriate environment	Newness Cleanliness Designed for children Safety
	Preschool as more than child care	Readying children academically Readying children socioemotionally
	Incorporation of parents within the school	Feeling welcome Parent teacher communication Parent involvement
	School's capacity for developing parents' navigational capital	Parenting resources Academic resources

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