

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: LINKING RESEARCH, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE

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The demand for high-quality education is experiencing a dramatic increase as our population of young Latino* learners continues to grow. Hispanics make up an increasingly large population in the United States.¹ There were 3.9 million four-year-olds in the U.S. in 2000,² and Hispanics accounted for 18.4% of this group. By the 2008–2009 school year, Latino children composed the majority or near-majority of first-grade students in nine of the largest cities in the U.S.³ Reports from the 2010 Census surpassed initial projections of Hispanic growth, as the number of Latinos reached 50,478,000, one million more than expected.⁴ Clearly, then, providing a quality education to this emerging population is crucial to our country's growth and ability to compete in the global economy.

Empirical research demonstrates that enrollment in high-quality early education leads to higher cognitive and social skills.⁵ This is especially evident for dual language learners⁶ and children from low-income families. Although Hispanic children made up 24% of children under the age of five,⁷ they had a lower representation in early childhood education (ECE) programs; just about half of Hispanics under five were enrolled in a center-based program, compared to 60% of White and 62% of Black children.⁸ For young Latinos living in poverty, attendance in preschool was even worse, with only 36% enrolled during the 2005–2006 school year, compared to 45% and 65% for their White and Black counterparts, respectively.⁹

Access to and enrollment in rigorous ECE programs translates into later academic achievement. Programs that establish high expectations for children's school readiness and create an optimal bilingual environment will contribute to reducing achievement and opportunity gaps. By age five, English-proficient Latino children are about three months behind White children in their pre-reading skills. This early gap is already wide upon entrance to kindergarten for Latinos who have mastery of English, but further disparity can be found for Hispanic children still acquiring proficiency in both Spanish and English. High school graduation rates confirm that one in six children who do not read proficiently in the third grade do not graduate high school on time.¹⁰ Efforts to address Latino students' academic outcomes must therefore begin in early education.

THE LATINO VOICE

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) welcomes the steady focus on evidence-based research and policy initiatives to transform ECE systems, and it emphasizes that the Latino voice must be central to these discussions. Latinos compose a significant portion of the population and yet remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in the educational system. It is vital that policies address the unique needs and backgrounds of Hispanic and dual language learner (DLL) children. In order to effectively improve the educational outcomes of these children, efforts must focus on their specific cultural and linguistic heritages.

In 2009, NCLR released its Core Qualities for the K–12 setting, which were developed to improve the educational experience, rate of high school graduation, and continuation to higher education

* The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

for Hispanic and DLL students. Two years later, NCLR released the Core Qualities for Successful Early Childhood Education Programs to provide a comparable guide for the early education of DLL and Latino children, families, programs, and communities. By introducing the Latino perspective to program evaluation, staffing, and instruction, the Core Qualities address programs' need for informed guidelines and examples of best practices when serving DLL and Latino children. Each Core Quality emphasizes the significance of collaboration among families, teachers, and program staff in developing comprehensive support for young Hispanic children. They also delineate clear expectations for programs, as well as a structure for reaching these goals. NCLR, in partnership with its Affiliate Network, constructed key standards and indicators to inform our work within the community and give voice to Latino and DLL children lacking ECE programs that adequately address their cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs. These tool kits are intended to assist administrators and providers serving these groups, as they inform programs offering appropriate, high-quality education and services.

CORE QUALITIES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

NCLR's Core Qualities outline best practices for programs serving Latino children and their families. The Core Qualities focus on eight areas:

1. High Expectations and High Supports
2. Collaborative Leadership
3. Cultural Competence
4. Bilingualism and Biliteracy
5. Sustained Meaningful Relationships
6. Family Engagement and Community Collaboration
7. Continuous Performance-Based Assessment
8. Relationships with Institutions of Higher Education

Each Core Quality (CQ) includes indicators that early childhood programs should adopt and follow. Programs can assess how closely they are meeting the indicators through related measures. Also matched to each indicator are examples of evidence that programs can use to demonstrate their adherence to the Core Qualities.

CQ 1 outlines responsibilities for ECE programs in providing appropriate environments, materials, and support structures for children in the ECE program, in addition to helping Latino children transition into kindergarten and public schools. Further elaboration on the expectations of the program's bilingual policy and strategies can be found in CQ 3, which details specific methods for incorporating appropriate cultural practices in the ECE program, and CQ 4. CQ 2, CQ 5, and CQ 6 explore the necessity of developing meaningful relationships with parents and families and expanding on collaborative leadership at all levels of the ECE program. CQ 7 focuses on documenting children's development and assessing the program's ability to meet the needs of children and families. Finally, CQ 8 emphasizes how establishing relationships with institutions of higher education supports teacher quality for the benefit of their daily interactions with children.

Adherence to the Core Qualities ensures that programs are providing the best environment, curriculum, and support for Hispanic children while capitalizing on the strengths that these children and their families offer to the school. NCLR is committed to an accountability system that strengthens its early childhood education model and contributes to the field's understanding of the issues specific to Latino and DLL children and families.

THE IMPACT OF THE CORE QUALITIES

Early childhood research shows that in order for "programs to successfully address children's learning needs [they] must be comprehensive, span multiple years, and target key transition points."¹¹ In the ECE community, 47 states have adopted Early Learning Standards, but with varying degrees of guidance on how to incorporate diverse cultures into the program and meet expected language outcomes for DLLs. Only 25 have established Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs)¹² that define standards for quality and a process for assessing, improving, and communicating the level of quality in their early education programs.¹³ NCLR's Core Qualities address gaps in the ECE field regarding teacher quality, assessment, and alignment between prekindergarten and third grade. Furthermore, they provide a structure to facilitate the identification and integration of strong practices related to cultural competency and dual language learning within the ECE program.

Prek—3 Alignment

NCLR's Core Qualities address quality in program services to remedy the cultural and academic disconnect that many Latino children and families experience when transitioning into kindergarten or public school. Although following each of the eight Core Quality guidelines will be beneficial to meeting the full range of children's needs, CQ 1 is especially important for the prekindergarten to kindergarten transition. This Core Quality outlines the role of program leaders and parents in constructing the necessary support, relationships, and environment to prepare children's school readiness skills. The careful alignment of early learning standards to kindergarten standards, and an emphasis on high expectations and high supports, will prepare children and families for what is expected of them in kindergarten and beyond.

Teacher Quality

Teacher quality, including preparation, experience, and education, are vital in improving child outcomes in the classroom. Although states vary in their requirements for teachers, as well as the variability in teacher education programs, the Core Qualities hold NCLR's ECE programs to high levels of teacher excellence. Under CQ 1, specific attributes are described regarding teachers' education level, expertise in working with children, and ability to engage Latino parents and families. CQ 4 identifies approaches for teachers to utilize research-based strategies to develop literacy and content in each language. CQ 3 guides teachers in developing daily routines and a classroom environment that enable children to function effectively within different cultures while maintaining and celebrating their own ethnic heritage. The role of the teacher is crucial in mediating children's linguistic, cultural, and cognitive growth in early education.

Teacher expectations are elaborated throughout the Core Qualities, but it is equally important to support teachers in developing their expertise to work with DLLs in early education. CQ 8 promotes the expectation of ECE staff, teachers, and administrators to meet and exceed the requirements for their position. This Core Quality frames the initial steps for programs to develop agreements and partnerships with higher education institutions on professional development trainings and early childhood coursework. The program's role in advocating on behalf of staff and supporting staff's continued

learning is essential to improving teacher quality, supporting professional growth, and retaining teachers in the ECE field—all of which are key elements of CQ 8.

Improved Child Outcomes Through Assessment and Accountability

Improving outcomes for Latinos involves a broader approach to assessment, including a "shared responsibility for results...what teachers do in their classrooms must be continuously shared, documented, and discussed."¹⁴ CQ 7 identifies appropriate assessment measures, collection of data, analysis of results, and application of information to ECE settings. Recognizing the importance of comprehensive data to understanding, documenting, and improving instruction for children and services for families, NCLR supports the integration of assessment systems. However, these accountability measures must take into account cultural and linguistic needs in addition to academic and developmental factors. The assessment and subsequent curriculum adjustment process requires authentically engaging parents at each step, from planning and goal setting to implementation and revision. To help with this endeavor, CQ 7 provides guidance in applying the results of program evaluations and individual child assessments in useful and transformative ways that improve program, teacher, child, and family outcomes.

CONCLUSION

NCLR's Core Qualities for Successful Early Childhood Education Programs are useful in informing and shaping the practices of program leaders and advocates serving Hispanic and DLL children. Each Core Quality addresses a specific domain that together fashion a detailed, comprehensive model for infusing Latino culture and values into an ECE program. As Latinos compose an ever-greater portion of the U.S. population, the betterment of society and our workforce becomes intricately tied to establishing high standards of care and education for Latino children. Programs using NCLR's Core Qualities will be empowered to build on strengths within their own structure and identify areas for further refinement in order to improve the educational and developmental outcomes of the children they serve.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010," *2010 Census Briefs*. Washington, DC, 2011.
- ² Foundation for Child Development, *America's Vanishing Potential: The Case for PreK-3rd Education* (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2008).
- ³ Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, "Majority/Near Majority of First Graders in Top Ten U.S. Cities Are Latino: The Coming Latino Demographic Revolution in Our Nation's Largest Urban School Districts," news release, March 5, 2009.
- ⁴ Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *How Many Hispanics? Comparing Census Counts and Census Estimates* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2011).
- ⁵ Arthur Reynolds, Katherine Magnuson, and Suh-Ruu Ou, *PK-3 Education: Programs and Practices that Work in Children's First Decade*, FCD Working Paper: Advancing PK-3 6 (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2006), 6.
- ⁶ Administration for Children and Families. *Head Start Impact Study: Final Report*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC, 2010.
- ⁷ Sarah Dolan, *Missing Out: Latino Students in America's Schools* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2009).
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Donald J. Hernandez, *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation* (New York: City University of New York, 2011).
- ¹¹ Ibid., 3.
- ¹² National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center, "QRIS Definition and Statewide Systems," <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/resource/qr-is-definition-and-statewide-systems> (accessed May 17, 2011).
- ¹³ W. Steven Barnett et al., *The State of Preschool 2010* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2010), <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2011), 11.
- ¹⁴ Rima Shore, *PreK-3rd: Teacher Quality Matters*, PreK-3rd Policy to Action Brief 3 (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 2009), 5.