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Latino Children Lag Behind Whites in Cognitive, but not Social-Emotional Skills, Says Latest Research by Bruce Fuller*

We know that many Latino children lag behind peers in their early cognitive and language growth, even before they start school. But UC Berkeley researchers find robust cooperative and social skills of Mexican-heritage youngsters, many of whom come from low-income families. This line of work – funded in part by UCEC – holds clear implications for how we think about child development and early schooling.

Researchers earlier discovered the so-called Latino health “paradox”, where the health of immigrant infants appears to rival those of whites despite having fewer economic resources or advantages. The robust health outcomes for immigrant babies continue from birth through about the first 9 or 12 months.

However, when children are about to enter the preschool years around 2 or 3 years of age, researchers have found that Latino children trail whites to a significant degree in language and communication skills. These cognitive gaps

between Latino and white children are somewhat unexpected given their relatively similar physical health status at birth. And these disparities persist as children progress through school. How we evaluate the progress of Latino children – into preschool and through their school years – holds special relevance in California as they now make up the majority of the school-aged population¹, but are also the least likely group to enroll in preschool¹.

Understanding why these early gaps occur and what may contribute to them is an important area for education researchers, policymakers and practitioners. Bruce Fuller, the Berkeley UCEC Site Director, and his colleagues have recently conducted several research studies examining these issues involved in the development of Latino and immigrant children. In one study that looked at maternal factors and practices in the home¹, Fuller and his colleagues found that several factors contributed to healthy birth outcomes for Latino, immigrant children including:

Prepared by:

Jonathan Gillespie, PhD, Research Analyst, & Anne Vo, PhD, UCEC Associate Director

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- Lower maternal rates of alcohol and tobacco use,
- Greater consumption of healthier foods, and
- Younger maternal age at birth.

However, despite these early protective factors, other maternal practices and economic factors at home appeared to contribute to cognitive gaps between Latinos and white children after about one year of age. For example, in the study, Latino mothers appeared to fall behind whites in terms of their praise and encouragement of children during interactive and problem-solving tasks. As their children grow older, Latino mothers may also be less likely to engage in academically stimulating activities at home such as reading. According to Fuller, many of these kinds of maternal practices associated with positive cognitive development inevitably suffer in families with few economic resources. Recent Latino immigrants as well as Mexican-Americans tend to have lower maternal education levels, larger family size, lower rates of employment, and higher rate of poverty compared to white families, which may all contribute to the cognitive gaps found in the literature.

While this may mean Latino children start out farther behind in their cognitive abilities, Fuller also points out that this isn't true for every developmental indicator. According to findings from another recent study by Fuller and his colleagues¹, Latino children also display as strong, if not stronger, social competencies than their white peers during this same time period between 2 and 4 years of age. Fuller points out that just because certain economic or educational factors appear to put Latino children at a cognitive disadvantage, their social-emotional skills may develop on a very different or, at least, independent pathway. Fuller and his colleagues find, for example, that Latina mothers:

- Had less strict or harsh parenting styles than white mothers,
- Had either less severe or fewer depressive symptoms than white mothers, and

- Provided high levels of responsiveness, care and affection towards their children except in cases of extreme poverty.

While Fuller acknowledges his data cannot fully account for the exact processes that contribute to the strong social skills of Latino children, his work suggests that mothers' depressive symptoms and harsh parenting approaches were in fact related to lower social-emotional growth. However, not all Latino subgroups had the same outcomes in this area, which strongly suggests that immigration status and country of origin also have important roles to play not only in terms of family and childrearing processes, but also for the cognitive and social development of children.

In a separate study¹, Fuller and his colleagues addressed this question of whether certain immigrants have an advantage in some areas of functioning compared to native-born or acculturated groups. For example, recent Mexican immigrant mothers tended to have fewer depressive symptoms as well as in-home arguments than native-born whites or Chinese immigrants. However, for cognitively stimulating practices such as reading at home, the pattern is basically the reverse with native-born whites and Chinese mothers reading more frequently to their children than recent Mexican immigrants. Other factors such as the presence of a father at home, number of children in the family and maternal employment status, which all varied depending on the country of origin, also exerted influences on the cognitive practices and levels of social-emotional functioning at home. Thus, Fuller and his colleagues concluded that immigrants do have advantages in certain areas according to their country of origin, which suggests there isn't a "one-size-fits-all" approach for early childhood providers who work with families on improving early childhood outcomes.

Returning to the cognitive gaps found between Latino children and their white peers, Fuller's research suggests several strategies that may help reduce these disparities in academic readiness. Because Latino children tend to

already display strong social-emotional skills, parents and early childhood practitioners may want to **emphasize cognitively stimulating activities at home such as reading and increasing exposure to stories and printed materials**. Latina mothers or providers who work with Latino families may also want to **encourage more frequent use of praise and support for children as they engage in interactive and problem-solving tasks** with their parents. For Latino families who may experience increased stress from economic deprivation, early childhood providers should also **focus on mental health interventions that target depression in mothers, improving the support mothers receive from other family members, and encouraging the use of positive parenting styles that are less harsh or strict in nature**.

Notes:

¹ <http://www.census.gov>

² <http://www.kidsdata.org/>

³ Fuller, Bein, Bridges, Halfon, Jung, Rabe-Hesketh, & Kuo (2010) Maternal practices that influence Hispanic infants health and cognitive growth. *Pediatrics*, 125, <http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/125/2/e324>

⁴ Guerrero, A. D., Fuller, B., Chu, L., Kim, A., Franke, T., Bridges, M., & Kuo, A. (2013). Early Growth of Mexican–American Children: Lagging in Preliteracy Skills but not Social Development. *Maternal and child health journal*, 17(9), 1701-1711.

⁵ Jung, S., Fuller, B., & Galindo, C. (2012). Family functioning and early learning practices in immigrant homes. *Child development*, 83(5), 1510-1526.

About the UCEC Site Director:

Bruce Fuller, Ph.D., is a professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. His current work focuses on the dilemmas around the radical decentering of public aims and institutions, including child care and public schools, as well as how different groups are served by this movement. Prior to becoming a full-time scholar, Fuller worked for a state legislature, a governor, then a sociologist at the World Bank. He taught at the Harvard School of Education before returning home to the San Francisco Bay Area.