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Administrators' Roles in Offering Dynamic Early Learning Experiences to Children of Latinx Immigrants

Alejandra Barraza and Pedro Martinez

Principals and school administrators play a critical role in creating learning environments that are sensitive to the needs of students from immigrant families. School administrators, particularly principals, are tasked with making decisions that directly and indirectly impact what happens in a classroom. They act as instructional and visionary leaders as well as resource managers and so they determine both the culture and pedagogy of the school. They determine whether the main focus of the early learning classrooms will be academic skill development (literacy, numeracy), cognitive skill development (social competence, behavioral self-regulation, problem-solving, and decision-making), socio-emotional processing (helping others, empathy, sharing), cultural development (positive identity construction, community connection, and values), physical development (gross and fine motor skills), or a combination of these domains.

This article outlines our approach both as administrators and as Latina/o immigrants ourselves who work within Latinx immigrant communities in San Antonio. Our identities as well as our experiences as superintendent (Martinez) and principal (Barraza) inform the ways in which we conceive of high-quality early learning for young children of Latinx immigrants. We would like to help principals recognize and think carefully about their influence on the culture and pedagogy of their early childhood programs (preK-2). To do this, we describe how one early childhood school serves Latinx immigrants as well as Hispanic and African-American families and consistently performs well above the state average for early learning benchmarks while offering children dynamic, agentic learning experiences.

By moving away from rote, academic learning strategies, Carroll Early Childhood Center has implemented seven early learning principles that prioritize children's curiosity while still meeting the requirements of state and federal standardized tests: (1) a welcoming physical environment, (2) a student-centered approach, (3) productive noise and chaos, (4) collaborative teaching and learning practices, (5) family engagement, (6) cultural sensitivity, and (7) holistic assessments. We believe that these principles can help administrators to balance multiple domains, work towards individual and collective academic success, honor communities and cultural backgrounds, and ultimately, treasure

the children for who they are. We discuss these principles in more detail below, but first we provide contextual details to help clarify the personal, philosophical, and conceptual underpinnings of our approach.

Our Positionality

The desire to move away from rote, academic learning strategies and prioritize children's curiosity and agency came from our own experiences as immigrants as well as our experiences as bilingual students and educators.

I (Pedro) arrived to Chicago as a first grader who did not speak a word of English. My family emigrated from Aguascalientes, Mexico. I remember coming into the classroom and being thrown into the English-only environment without a transitional bilingual program. I was scared. The school really didn't know what to do with me. I was moved to at least three different classrooms because I didn't speak English. Little by little, because I was forced to, I learned English. It wasn't until I was in the fifth or sixth grade I realized, because the teachers told me, I was significantly below grade level. Helping students succeed and be proud of their language and who they are is personal as well as professional.

I (Alejandra) understand the transformative power of education. My father was the first in his family to go to college, receiving a Ph.D. He arrived to the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s with limited knowledge of English. He has always shared stories of his times at UW and highlighted how the school and his professors always created a welcoming and nurturing environment for him. He was one of a few Latino students in the program and credits the support afforded to him by his professors as the reason for him completing the degree in three years. When I see my students and families who have emigrated from other countries, I always envision my parents as they journeyed to the US to obtain an education. Educating Latinx students and supporting the underserved families is personal to me.

These personal and professional experiences factor into our roles as superintendent and principal, respectively, in shaping high-quality early learning environments for Latinx families.

Administrators' Impact on ECE for Latinx Children

Superintendents are perhaps the most influential and authoritative leaders in a district. Their instructional leadership can support, push, and empower principals to create high-quality early learning environments that include dynamic, agentic learning experiences (Adair & Colgrove, 2014). Superintendents are charged with the responsibility to think carefully about meeting the needs of all students in their district and to appreciate the diversity and various needs of those they supervise at the district and school levels. For superintendents who have early childhood centers or schools with preK-2 grades, instructional leadership can be difficult. Many superintendents are not given sufficient, high-quality early childhood preparation in their certificate and degree programs (Bush & Middlewood, 2013). Seeking a common understanding with building administrators and district staff who have expertise in early childhood education helps superintendents to develop a vision for early childhood and then share that vision and expectations with the district.

Superintendents, along with district administrators, benefit from learning about high-quality early childhood practices and strategies that can guide school-building administrators and their teaching staff to offer children a range of dynamic learning experiences (Barraza, 2017). The goal is to work with Latinx families towards a common understanding and commitment to the pedagogical practices that identify effective early learning environments, are sensitive to the strengths and needs of early learners from Latinx families, and position Latinx families in positive, rather than deficit, ways.

Principals also play a critical role in helping to create a learning environment that is sensitive to the needs of Latinx immigrant students. Principals are the primary decision-makers at the school level and their decisions impact the pedagogy and culture of the school. As such, they are the best-positioned people on a campus to lead the charge to ensure successful and continuous years of quality teaching for Latinx students. Often, principals have to work to find a balance between seeing young students as individuals who have personal interests and individual academic, social, and emotional needs and seeing them according to their academic progress as determined by test scores. It is important for administrators to understand that their leadership and influence set the tone for the experience of every child and every adult on their campus.

The role of administrators in creating positive, high-quality learning environments specifically for young children of Latinx immigrants is important because of what many children of immigrants are denied at school. Many immigrant families have come to the United States in an effort to improve the

lives of their children. For example, in the Children Crossing Borders study of over 200 immigrant parents in five U.S. cities (Tobin, Arzubagi & Adair, 2013), parents almost always cited the desire to offer an education to their children that they did not have themselves as a motivation for migrating.

Latinx parents specifically spoke about the trust they placed in teachers and administrators because of their expertise and knowledge of early childhood education. This deep care and concern about their child's education as well as their trust in school leaders is significant. Administrators have the responsibility and the influence to make decisions that offer young children of Latinx immigrants the same range of dynamic learning experiences that their wealthier, native-born peers receive in their early childhood programs. To demonstrate the range of decisions that can offer young children from Latinx immigrant families' dynamic learning experiences, we first describe the geographic and demographic realities of Carroll Early Childhood Center. Then we detail each of the seven principles of high-quality early childhood education that has become commonplace at Carroll.

Carroll Early Childhood Center

Carroll is located in San Antonio on the east side of the city, where many of its students are at or below the poverty level and are recent immigrants to the United States. The school's population is two thirds Latinx students and one-third African-American students. One quarter of the students come from homes that speak Spanish.

The students from Carroll face significant challenges in their young lives. The district recognized that a thoughtfully implemented early learning program could have a powerful positive impact on the lives of the students, their families, and the community in which they live. With this in mind, Carroll was reopened in 2009 as an early childhood campus within the San Antonio Independent School District. Carroll offers a Head Start program to three- and four-year-old students and has recently added a kindergarten program that serves the previous year's Head Start graduates. We have worked tirelessly to make our school a happy, safe place where students matter, where learning is fun, meaningful, engaging, and culturally sensitive, and where families are welcomed and encouraged to participate in the education of their children.

Principle #1: Welcoming Physical Environment

When students and their families arrive at school, they see a well-maintained front lawn and grounds free of debris. This may seem like a small detail; however, our desire is to show families that we care about the cleanliness and presentation of our school because we recognize that our students will learn better in an environment that is warm and inviting, clean, and free of clutter (Maxwell, 1998; Rentzou, 2014). We want students to enter the school and feel that they are in a special place. Classrooms are filled with natural light, generating a peaceful aesthetic.

Teachers at Carroll are encouraged to experiment with arranging their classrooms in ways that will allow students freedom of movement, as well as provide creative and flexible learning spaces. Classrooms walls at Carroll are covered with vocabulary words and diagrams in English and Spanish and other images that reflect the students' languages, cultures, and experiences. The use of words and images related to immigrant children's culture validates what they bring from their own experience and recognizes it as an important part of the learning process (Martinez, 2013).

Principle #2: Student-Centered Approach

The hallways at Carroll are deliberately student-centered, with interactive learning walls that encourage the children to feel free to move their hands and touch their surroundings (Dodge, 1992; Maxwell, 1998; Read, Sugawara, & Brandt, 1999; Sanoff, 1995). When students are waiting in line for their turn in the restroom, there are books and eye-catching displays to capture their attention. Children don't have to walk in straight lines in the hallways. "Herding," or letting the children walk freely down the halls, is encouraged. The children also sing as they are walking down the halls, so the hallways are never quiet.

Classrooms are also meant to be student-centered. Teachers continually make changes and add items to their centers, depending on students' interests, so no classroom is the same as another. Teachers use everyday items to decorate the classroom and incorporate nature into their decor. They display students' artwork and projects throughout the room and do not use store-bought posters. Students participate in labeling areas with their own writing or by drawing pictures.

Principle #3: Productive Noise and Chaos

As a campus, we have collectively pushed back on the boxed curriculum approach. Instead, teachers use a number of curricula and approaches aimed at helping children engage in peer conversations, collective instruction with the teacher, and a range of learning experiences in which children are afforded opportunities to explore and learn. This kind of environment results in a noisier classroom. However, we believe that noise and even constructive chaos (Barraza, 2017) are important to our school culture. Children need educators who allow them to use their agency and provide input as to what, how, and when they learn. Given the appropriate space and agency, as well as a willing and thoughtful teacher, students as young as pre-kindergarteners can make appropriate decisions about the best ways for them to learn, based on their own needs and interests (Adair, 2014).

In order to support children's agency in their learning while still being accountable for children's academic benchmarks, we continuously document the interests of the children. We try to provide appropriate lessons that are of interest to them and we offer time each day for children to design their own research projects and engage with their peers in activities they choose. Teachers have the autonomy to design their own schedules around set meal and shared space times for library, music, and other kinds of specialty areas. This control over scheduling given by the principal to the teachers has allowed teachers to consider the interests and ideas of children in forming the schedule each day.

Principle #4: Collaborative Teaching and Learning Practices

Along with the autonomy to schedule, teachers have control over the materials, lessons, order of content, and uses of purchased curriculum. This type of autonomy allows teachers to engage children in collaborative teaching and learning practices. Children ask one another for help and engage one another in problem-solving, project design, writing, drawing, organizing, and a host of other skill sets as they work together on different projects with their teachers. Teachers work to create an environment that is conducive to collaboration, where all the participants share in the process of learning. Teachers also meet weekly to work in teams to plan, evaluate, and support each other and serve on committees that focus on different areas of school improvement.

Principle #5: Family Engagement

Family engagement that is based on cultural sustainability and parental knowledge and not deficit ideas is critical for long-term student success, particularly for children of immigrants (see Colegrove, this

volume). We invite parents to collaborate with us in the education of their children. We make certain we have staff who speak Spanish. All communications that go home are in English and in Spanish. A Carroll staff member stands at the door to welcome parents as they arrive at the school. Parents are encouraged to drop their kids off at the classroom. Classes and performances are offered for parents close to dismissal time, making it easier for parents to attend. All classes are offered in English and Spanish.

Parents visit classrooms and volunteer regularly at the school. For the past three years, the school has designated a weeklong “Open Classroom.” The open classroom event invites parents to sign up for a 30-minute visit during instruction time. Parents can visit and observe the classroom in real time to see what their child does at school. Children enjoy sharing their learning space with their families.

When parents volunteer at the school, they decorate the stage for performances and plan for upcoming school projects and activities. All teachers are expected to have a communication app to show parents what is happening at school. Teachers are encouraged to start their communication with two positive observations before they give any negative information to the parent about their child.

The efforts to engage families also include encouraging parents to apply to be substitutes. Five of the instructional assistants we currently employ were parents of students who attended Carroll. We encourage each other to go back to school at Carroll. Several of our teachers are working on master’s degrees together, our instructional assistants are going to school to become teachers, 10 out of the current 25 teachers were once instructional assistants, and the custodian went back to school and became an instructional assistant. The vision to “Grow Our Own” is based on supporting each other and pushing each other to go a step further professionally.

Principle #6: Cultural Sensitivity and Attention to Families’ Realities

Children at Carroll come to school with a variety of experiences, situations, and relationships. These cultural differences are important to acknowledge publicly as a way to help families feel comfortable entering and participating in the school. The teachers at Carroll often come from the same linguistic, geographic, ethnic, and racial communities as the students. This comes from recruitment and retention efforts as well as our “Grow Our Own” program. Bilingual and multilingual teachers and staff are always available for parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles who are raising the children who attend Carroll. There is acknowledgment of important holidays, seasons, songs, stories, decorations, and

other cultural connections. Parents are encouraged to be with their children as long as they would like to during morning drop-off. Many teachers get to know grandparents and other loving caretakers who drop off and pick up children from school.

In addition to cultural sensitivity, we are trying to address some of the difficult realities children at Carroll face. Structural inequalities and continued injustices have taken their toll on many families. To consider and be sensitive to these realities, teachers are encouraged to get to know each child in their classroom without judgment or negative assumptions. Facing the reality of the children's lives has become critical to honoring the children and their families. Sometimes students come to school tired because they have been up late or up early because of parents' or relatives' work schedules, so students sometimes sleep in a quiet space in the classroom. Each classroom has some small mats for this purpose.

Sometimes children don't get to play outside when they are home, so we offer spaces outside of the classroom. Teachers are encouraged to go outside with children when they need to, not just when it is scheduled. They also have the option to have snack time, read aloud, or even a group lesson outside. At Carroll we have built a mud kitchen, yoga room, vegetable garden, tricycle trail, and various items on the playground where the children can play. We hold each other accountable in our interactions with the students by talking openly—not judgmentally—about the children's realities and how we can make school a place that shows respect and care for the children and their families. Everyone is encouraged to contribute to the positive learning experiences of the students at Carroll, including the office and custodial staff.

Principle #7: Holistic Assessments

The primary assessment practice that we use at Carroll is a twice-a-year feedback process called Learning Stories. Learning Story assessments come from New Zealand's Early Childhood Framework *Te Whāriki*. Learning Stories documents learning with photographs and narrative in ways that contextualize and demonstrate growth in a range of areas. This type of assessment focuses on the ways students have shown growth in their socio-emotional development as well as in academic and cognitive areas.

Teachers consider students' strengths and growth over a period of time. Then they write an individual story that includes photographs for each of the students, telling them how they have seen them grow. Learning Stories are shared with both the student and their caregivers. This focus of extending beyond

preparing students to do well on standardized assessments has resulted in the students performing well consistently on benchmark assessments required by state and federal mandates. For example, on the most recent Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment, kindergarteners at Carroll scored above the national average and well above the state average.

Final Thoughts

Latinx children of immigrants are the fastest growing segment of children in the United States entering public schools in the early grades. We believe that administrators and teachers need to create a school environment where students feel welcome, accepted, and respected. Administrators can empower teachers to encourage students to be thinkers and problem solvers and to take responsibility for their own learning. Instead of providing rote, academic-only experiences, administrators can help teachers offer dynamic learning experiences to children. As more and more school districts include early childhood programs and more schools include pre-K programs, it is important for administrators who have early childhood learners on their campuses to make decisions that can help all children have access to dynamic learning experiences and to environments that value them as families and communities.

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Alejandra received her Ph.D. from the University of Texas-Austin in Curriculum and Instruction in Early Childhood Education. Her work focuses on how administrators see high quality early childhood education particularly for the young underserved population. She worked full time as she pursued her doctorate which allowed her the unique opportunity to bridge theory with practice. As part of her doctoral work she was interned at the U.S. Department of Education during the time the Office of Early Learning was being established at DOE.



Pedro Martinez is the Superintendent of San Antonio Independent School District. Joining in 2015, Martinez has helped bring to the district a focus on improving academic achievement so that more students are performing at higher levels. In January 2016, he unveiled the SAISD Blueprint for Excellence: Target 2020, which outlines the strategies the district is using to achieve 10 academic goals by the end of the 2019-2020 school year. Martinez has more than 20 years of experience in the private, nonprofit, and public education sectors. He holds an MBA from DePaul University, a bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and is a graduate of the Broad Superintendents Academy.