

# Chapter 43

## Early Childhood Education and Development in Mexico

Rebeca Mejía-Arauz and Gloria Quiñones

**Abstract** This chapter discusses the current research agenda in early childhood education in Mexico and reviews research pointing to the pedagogical challenges the country faces at the present time. A historical account of early childhood in Mexico is also discussed to unpack the educational institutions in which families, children, and educators participate in. The curriculum models currently used in early childhood are further analyzed within a historical frame to better grasp what the society in Mexico has valued. These values are translated into children's development of cognitive skills, as is the case, for example, of oral traditions. Throughout the chapter it is discussed how language and communication has been a strong emphasis in early childhood education, in specific in the preschool years. However, there are still relevant situations that have not been thoroughly studied, such as cultural variations in language or how to make connections between home and schools to increase children's oral language development. Another finding discussed in this chapter is the role of play in Mexican early childhood education. Some of the challenges found are how educators can develop pedagogical strategies that can be used to improve literacy development and how play can be seen as an important strategy for children's learning. All these dimensions also need to be considered when studying a very complex society in Mexico's diverse rural, urban, and indigenous communities.

**Keywords** Mexico • Early childhood education • Child development • Indigenous children • Urban and rural child development

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R. Mejía-Arauz (✉)

Department of Psychology, Education and Health, ITESO University, Guadalajara, Mexico  
e-mail: [rebmejia@iteso.mx](mailto:rebmejia@iteso.mx)

G. Quiñones

Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia  
e-mail: [gloria.quinones@monash.edu](mailto:gloria.quinones@monash.edu)

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Attention to early childhood development in Mexico through official institutional services started with childcare centers around mid-twentieth century, which increased with the socioeconomic movement of women entering the work force. Although there was a history of governmental actions since 1837, it is until this century when educational programs for 3–6-year-olds became compulsory. In this chapter, we discuss social and educational policies for early childhood attention and the current research agenda for Mexican early childhood education. In general, there is the need for conducting more research in all developmental domains in early childhood in Mexico and also in terms of applied research. Among several areas of research and practice, current pedagogical challenges in Mexico include understanding play as an important developmental and pedagogical leading activity in early childhood, which has been an under-researched and applied area. Also, research on families in different sociocultural contexts and more specifically in relation to socio-affective dimensions is pointed out as another area for further research.

### **43.1 Background and Local Conditions**

Mexico is a federal republic situated in North America, bordering the United States of America in the north and Guatemala and Belize in the south. After the census of 2010, the total population reported was 112,336,538 inhabitants, of which 77.8% lived in urban areas (INEGI 2010), but the country's cultural and ethnic diversity is reflected in the number of indigenous towns (52), native languages (80), and 6,913,362 speakers of indigenous languages (Bertely Busquets 2003; INEGI 2010).

In the last 20 years, the proportion of children has decreased compared to the increase in adult population. Results of the 2010 census reported 10,528,322 children 0–4 years old and 11,047,537 children of ages 5–9 years (INEGI 2010).

With regard to education, according to the Federal Constitution, it is compulsory to attend basic school, which includes 3 years of preschool starting at 3 years old, 6 years of primary school, and 3 years of secondary school. The state is obliged to provide these levels of education to all Mexican children at no cost. There are also public and private institutions providing care and education for children from newborns of 45 days up to 3 years in a system called initial education.

### **43.2 Current Early Childhood Educational Policies**

Social and educational policies in Mexico reflect an interest in providing better quality education and a more extended coverage for children of all ages including their health and safety. This has been part of a national action plan, called “Un México apropiado para la infancia y adolescencia 2002–2010” (A suitable Mexico for childhood and adolescence) (SEDESOL 2002).

By 1996, Knaul and Parker pointed out that the provision of early childcare in Mexico was a problem not solved. To date this problem continues, particularly for those in more extreme poverty conditions. Extreme poverty is increasing (Pujol and Torres 2000), and in particular in rural zones, which include larger marginalization and exclusion in terms of social services for health and education (Roman and Valencia 2012). To date, more and more mothers with jobs with no social support benefits leave their infants at home under the care of siblings or their grandmothers (Maldonado 2013), putting in risk two extremes of the population in terms of age.

Due to the increase in women joining the labor force in the last four decades, it became an urgent need to extend the provision of childcare institutions and programs for infants (Knaul and Parker 1996). To attend this need, Mexico developed institutions and programs called initial education (*educación inicial*) for children 0–3 years old (CONIA 2010).

Regarding early childhood formal education, it starts at 3 years of age and it covers a period of 3 years. Although Mexico has a history of offering childcare from 1837, it is important to note that at the level of preschool education, it became compulsory only until recently, with a reform in education in 2002, which had to be gradually accomplished by 2009 (INEE 2006). In 2010, reports showed that 52% of children between 3 and 5 years of age attended preschool, whereas 95% of the population of children between 6 and 14 years old were reported to attend primary school (INEGI 2010). In the section that follows, we will expand this topic and present the different contexts of early childhood education and development in Mexico.

### 43.3 Different Educational Systems in Early Childhood

The divisions in social classes and inequalities of the education system are a challenge (Latapi Sarre 2002; Martínez Rizo 2002; Reimers 2002) that Mexico faces to date. On the one hand, there is a strong social class divide between private and public childcare centers and schools, and on the other hand, there are strong differences between education in urban, rural, and indigenous communities, all of which involve different opportunities for children. In the twentieth century, children in indigenous and rural communities were more vulnerable in all accounts, and in particular, these populations experienced educational inequalities. In an effort to provide equality in education, the Mexican Ministry of Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*) developed several modalities of schooling: general, rural, indigenous, and community education. The last two are modalities that serve particular needs of children in indigenous towns and in very isolated communities, whereas general schools are found in urban and rural cities (INEE 2006).

Early childhood education in Mexico is growing, and social and economic changes and international pressures have led to the creation and impulse of programs in different social institutions for children's education and care (SEP 2003,

2004). The next section comprises a discussion of these social institutions and the goals for learning and development of Mexican children.

### **43.4 Early Childhood Preschool Institutions**

Private and public long day care in Mexico is provided by the Centers for Childhood Development (Centros de Desarrollo Infantil CENDI) for children from 0 to 4 years of age. These centers follow the program developed for initial education, which is an integrated model that focuses on children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. The program also takes into account children's environmental and sociocultural conditions and includes a program for parenthood education and particular institutional staff training in urban and rural contexts (CONAFE 2010). These centers have two different modalities: one follows a more formal schooled program, while the other tries to address particular needs and traditions of rural and indigenous communities.

The historical antecedents of these centers for early childhood go back to 1837, but probably this would apply in particular to Mexico City. More extended actions took place around 1921 after the Mexican Revolution as an attempt to deal with different social problems regarding children such as the many orphans unattended that resulted from this revolution. Later on, in the 1970s, childcare centers were more often available for families that had formal jobs, leaving those in the informal job market with no options, that is, those in poverty or extreme poverty would not have access to these public services for their children, whether they needed education, health treatments, or child-rearing support.

Preschool institutions (for 3–6 years of age) follow a system based on competencies designed by the Secretary of Public Education (SEP). In this Mexican Preschool Educational Program (SEP 2004), curriculum learning goals are directed to develop in children: (a) personal and social development, (b) language and communication, (c) mathematical thinking, (d) exploration and knowledge of the world, (e) expression and appreciation of art, and (f) physical and health development. The character of the program is open; this means the educator will select and design what is convenient for children. Educators have freedom to plan according to learning projects and depending on the cultural and linguistic contexts of children.

### **43.5 Current Research on Early Childhood Education**

In Mexico, research on childhood development has focused more often on those processes and skills related to school performance. Research on early childhood development is scarce and often focuses on those areas connected to school, such as the learning prerequisites for a better school performance. For such reason, the research presented here includes in some cases preschool and school-age children.

### 43.6 Early Childhood Research on Pedagogy and Competencies Models

In a large-scale study, researchers evaluated competencies of preschool children and how they develop the competencies related to the official curriculum enlisted above in 40 centers in Mexico City and the States of Mexico, Puebla, and Yucatan (Juarez Hernandez 2008). The purpose of the study was to identify and evaluate children's competencies, to better understand learning environments and pedagogies of educators.

In relation to pedagogical practices, it was found that educators focused on activities such as coloring, cutting, and pasting (Martinez et al. 2004). The researchers pointed out that children were bored, and the pedagogical emphasis was on an instructive pedagogy. The activities planned such as coloring aimed to have similar results on – for example, drawing ducks and learning that ducks are yellow. These activities did not provide children's active exploration and diverse outcomes such as having another color for ducks. One of the challenges discussed by the researchers was how to offer support for educators to have a sociocultural theoretical foundation that informed their pedagogical practice. This remains a challenge for educators on how to move from instructive pedagogy where the educator is at the center of the educational practice, into focusing on the child's own agenda involving play.

In a similar line, Paniagua (2008) identified which competencies teachers expected by the end of preschool education as well as the tools they offered in order for their students to develop cognitive competencies, such as perception, attention, spatial cognition, imagination, language, memory, problem solving, and creativity. Results showed that the structure and organization of the classroom were important factors for children's stimulation, but other factors related to better performance in the students were teachers who kept a warm and enthusiastic tone in their classroom, making sure the tasks instructions were clear for students, stimulating and guiding student intervention as well as providing them with positive feedback when they provided accurate answers or opinions in order to build confidence in themselves, encouraging them to participate in classroom activities, and inviting them to exercise respect for diversity of opinions.

In summary, these results were related to competencies in the areas of communication, reasoning, information processing, metacognitive, and self-regulatory competencies (Toledo-Rojas and Mejía-Arauz 2013).

Regarding sociocultural factors, research conducted by Matute et al. (2009) explored the influence of parents' educational level, type of school, and gender in the development of attention and memory, among others, in children of 5–8 years of age in public and private schools. Parent's educational level was correlated with some of the children's tests results (digit regression, verbal-auditory retrieval, visual memory); also, girls in private schools performed better than boys. The authors discussed that parents with higher educational level may influence language development through their daily interaction with their children, which in turn results in higher performance in cognitive tests, such as memory and attention.

This current research has focused on children's cognitive abilities, which are valued in the Mexican society as a result of the influence of the institution of school. In a similar line, language development has been considered a main area of children's development in the school and family contexts even though there is not as much research as in other areas, for example, compared to literacy. The next section focuses on the state of the art on oral language research.

### **43.7 Early Childhood Research on Oral Language Development**

As a result of an educational reform in 2002, oral language was prioritized as one of the most relevant skills to develop in the preschool years. Ideally, the responsibility for the development of this cultural tool would be shared between school and families, because as students interact in different social contexts, this would facilitate the development of more extensive vocabulary and narrative skills. However, with the educational reform and from a perspective of formal education, the classroom is still considered one of the most important settings for learning new forms of communication, and in view of this, the reform oriented preschool teachers to create a stimulating environment for the children to participate and develop cognitive skills through oral expression.

Despite its great importance in early childhood development and socialization, the study of oral language in Mexico is relatively scarce. Interestingly, consistent and strong research on language development comes from work on indigenous populations, which increased in particular after the Zapatista movement in 1994. In contrast, the study of the changing conditions of children in urban contexts with the pressure of bilingualism (Spanish-English) for middle class and higher SES children or cultural variation in language development within the country has not been thoroughly studied.

Most of the research we found addresses language learning in the school context, for example, in relation to the results of educational programs in preschool or how language helps the development of knowledge in peer interaction in preschool classes.

Among the research on the influence of preschool programs, there is a comparative study on learning differences in preschool programs covering language and communication and mathematical thinking conducted by Backhoff et al. (2008). They looked at the developmental level and skills accomplished in preschool children of different gender, age, school grade, in public and private schools, and in urban and rural populations. The results of the study in language and communication showed a significant gap regarding educational achievement between preschoolers. In rural communities, the developmental level and skills were even lower in such a way to subsequently impact their academic achievement; while 74–81% achieved the basic skills in language and communication expected for their grade

and age, in urban public and private schools the percentage of children was between 93% and 99%. Sociocultural conditions were associated to these results, such as parental educational level, number of books at home, frequency in attending cultural events, and school type (public or private, rural or community courses). Older pupils achieved lower scores in comparison to those students with normative age in the same grade. Also, the results of this study are consistent with international research showing higher performance in preschool girls in oral and written language and communication, compared to boys in the same group. Although different authors and researchers around the world (Mussen et al. 1976; Dale et al. 1998 in Papalia and Feldman 2012) have documented this phenomenon, there is scarce documentation or research about the Mexican children (Toledo-Rojas and Mejía-Arauz 2013).

Although the family context and parent-child interaction is crucial for oral language development in early childhood, this is not a frequent topic of study involving urban populations or in populations that speak Spanish. However, a study noted that families in Mexico tended to tell family stories and anecdotes during family gatherings while children were present and often participated (Reese et al. 2011); while this helps children in getting used to a narrative style that organize their thinking and provide them with the cultural vocabulary and narrative style of their cultural communities (Bruner 1991), this is not often a resource that schools use to make a connection between home and school contexts of learning.

González de la Torre (2004) analyzed samples of written narrations constructed by preschool children and found a strong relation between the structure of children's narratives and the structure of popular tales, TV stories, and children's own experiences with particular coherence in the stories of 5-year-old children or older. This shows how children make use of home, family, and out-of-school experiences in an important way that could be used as pedagogical strategies in schools as a bridge for children's learning.

Research on language development with indigenous children, most of them specifically referring to the indigenous population living in the center and south of Mexico, has been conducted by sociolinguistics specialists such as De León (2001; 2005; 2007; 2011) who explores oral language development in Mayan children of Chiapas.

De León (2005) studied the relation between language learning and cognition with Mayan children from Chiapas who speak the Tzotzil language. In her studies, she describes the way in which children construct meanings in their social interactions in everyday life, in such a way that involves emotional development. Important part of this development is through repetitions that at the same time transform new structures within the frame of the language (De León 2007). De León points out that this also occurs in verbal play where children learn to manipulate and play with metalinguistic forms and structure. The extent of research on play and development in Mexican children will be discussed later on in the chapter, but because literacy development is a topic more often related to language and cognitive development, we first address this topic.



### 43.8 Early Childhood Research on Literacy Development

Literacy development in childhood is one of the most studied subjects by researchers in fields and disciplines related to children development and education in Mexico. There is wide agreement on its relevance not only for formal learning but also as an integral part of children's development in social context.

To date, Mexico still faces severe problems regarding literacy, with 6.9% of the Mexican population being illiterate, despite the fact that basic education is free and mandatory in the country (INEGI 2011). In 2000, Mexico obtained the last place in the PISA test (OCDE 2005), and 3 years later, the statistics were still the same. More recent results in the test known as ENLACE (Evaluación Nacional del Logro Académico en Centros Escolares, National Evaluation of Academic Achievement in School Centers (SEP 2012)) showed that 43% of students performed at a very basic level in Spanish class, and 15% did not achieve this basic level.

In response to such state of affairs regarding children's reading and writing performance at all school levels, Mexican educational and research institutions have made continued efforts to study literacy development with the idea of orienting better educational programs for children and for developing social programs that promote literacy practices in the population as a whole, considering, in particular, issues of social inequality.

Important contributions in research focusing on early childhood prerequisites for learning of reading and writing, and in particular, children's understanding of writing, come from the work by Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979). This work was followed by a good number of studies on how children learn to read and write in Mexico and in Latin America (e.g., Vega 2005). Ferreiro y Teberosky (1979) were pioneers in Latin America in pointing out that before experiencing formal education, children develop certain notions of the alphabetical system, developing to an extent processes and skills that are precursors to the acquisition of reading and writing.

Following these conceptions, other studies conducted in Mexico showed that preschool children recognize written codes related to content, which is meaningful in their communities. Vega (2005) has called this process emergent alphabetization, which includes knowledge, behaviors, and abilities children show in an effort to interpret symbols that they use for communicative purposes regardless of whether they use scribbles, drawings, or letters.

More recently, research following the perspective of the New Literacy Studies (Gee 2004) found that children who lack the social mediations and opportunities to be acquainted with school like vocabulary and types of texts take longer to develop skills that are needed for learning to read and write according to what is being taught in schools. Recent research in Mexico shows this is not only explained in terms of the distance between family literacy practices and school demands but also is related to a lack of a literacy environment in their communities (Mejía-Arauz et al. 2011; Reese et al. 2011). This research shows how informal oral language and everyday life narratives are important practices in Mexican communities and is scarcely acknowledged in schools. One of the challenges is how to use this type of oral



language as a pedagogical scaffolding strategy in schools as a beginning point for improving literacy development in children. A more thorough review of literacy development research in Mexico can be found in Mejía-Arauz et al. (2013).

### 43.9 Early Childhood Research on Play

Research on how children play and how these practices are incorporated in Mexican early childhood programs is scarce. This section discusses and provides examples of the importance of considering play in early childhood curriculum in Mexico.

Despite the well-recognized importance of play in childhood development (Cole and Cole 1989; Göncü 1999; Van Oers 2012), few studies in our country focus on how children's play and involvement in entertainment activities influence their development. These research topics seem of high importance in particular because of the changing conditions in lifestyle for families and children in urban contexts as well as in rural and indigenous communities. Particularly in urban contexts, as more mothers spend longer hours in their jobs, children are left longer at school for extra school classes or in childcare institutions (Mejía-Arauz 2015). For that reason, it is important to conduct more research on the impact of these activities and changes in children's play.

Among the few studies, Briceño (2001) pointed out that in contemporary families in México, play has lost its main relevance and comes only after all the programmed activities that adults conduct or choose for children. This may be a result of parents' lack of possibilities to spend leisure time with their children due to their job demands. But also, in some cultural groups, such as in some indigenous groups, adults do not often get involved as playmates with their children because older brothers, cousins, and neighbors take that role (Gaskins and Miller 2009; Toledo-Rojas and Mejía-Arauz 2015). In a similar line, Martinez et al. (2004) discuss that in Mexican cultural practices, there is some lack of adult play with children.

Another related line of research understudied is the television and use of electronic devices as part of children's leisure time. In view of family organization and conditions, electronic games or activities as well as viewing television have gained a different role in the life of a child. As parents lack the time or habit to spend playtime with their children, they let their children watch TV for long hours, and in this way, television becomes a "virtual nanny," being this a resource openly used by parents (Briceño 2001). This study shows how parents might not realize the importance and functions other kinds of play have in the development of their children. However, through television, children are also learning how to play. In a study conducted in the north of Mexico, Mayra a 5-year-old child living in a rural community played and perform a telenovela (soap opera) role (Quiñones 2013a, b). Television was an important everyday event in the life of families; however, the role of adults still is important in how they can recognize and extend children's learning through play.

Furthermore, play is also absent in schools. For example, pedagogical strategies and the different forms of participation in play are rarely mentioned in the Preschool

Educational Program document (Manteca 2004), and therefore research on the influence of play in the context of preschool classrooms is almost nonexistent, even though the Mexican Preschool Educational Program mentions its relevance:

El juego es un impulso natural de las niñas y los niños y tiene manifestaciones y funciones múltiples. Es una forma de actividad que les permite la expresión de su energía, de su necesidad de movimiento y puede adquirir formas complejas que propician el desarrollo de competencias. (pp. 35)

Play is a natural impulse in girls and boys and has multiple manifestations and functions. It is a form of activity that allows the expression of the child's energy and of his/her need of movement and can take complex forms that encourage the development of competencies.

In this curriculum document, play is acknowledged as a form of individual, peer, and collective participation. In this view, play is seen as individual activity where children are able to concentrate and a collective activity where children accept rules and are able to self-regulate their actions. A greater emphasis is made on how play allows children to develop competencies. In relation to the pedagogical role of the educator, this will depend on the educator's orientation and initiative to extend play experiences and value children's everyday knowledge.

The view of play as natural, as is conceptualized in the Mexican preschool system, has been questioned by researchers (Fleer 2013), and several researchers have acknowledged the importance of play as a cultural and historical construct (Brooker and Edwards 2010; Fleer 2010b, 2013; Schousboe and Winther-Lindqvist 2013). In European heritage communities, play has been considered a central activity in children.

Contemporary approaches in the study of play acknowledge the importance of the role the adult might have in children's learning and how teachers contribute and collaborate in how children learn in play theoretically and conceptually (Jordan 2010; Fleer 2010a, b).

In order to understand how educators and what theoretical ideas inform their views on play, in their research, Martínez Preciado et al. (2003) found how educators focus on having similar and conventional results. For example, educators mentioned how they expected children to draw all cows the same, with black spots; educators rarely account on children's interests or in having rich conversations with children about them. In the same study, it was found that play was described as a tool for developing motor skills, as a strategy to control groups, play involved rhymes, imitation, and repetition. This view of play as natural is prevalent in the views of educators and as discussed by the authors rarely is mentioned how play develops children's imagination.

In a recent study, Quiñones (2013a) shows how in a rural and an urban community in the north of Mexico children's play involves rhymes and music, and this is usually performed in recess or break time. The early childhood curriculum in these preschools makes emphasis on academic skills such as motor fine skill and preliteracy skills. Play is not prevalent in these two preschools, and the role of the adult is yet to be understood in how they can participate, sustain, and extend children's conceptual development in play. This shows how in the Mexican society cognitive skills and academic activities are favored rather than play. This remains an area where there is the need for further research on how play is culturally understood in rural, urban, and indigenous communities.

### 43.10 Early Childhood Research on Family Practices

In this section, we focus on the role family plays in different aspects of childcare and childhood education from parenting practices at home to the relation of family with the school. Some of the research found in this area in Mexico follows a quantitative approach with statistical analyses of relationships between family sociodemographic factors and children's achievement in schools. This is the case of the work conducted by Bazán et al. (2007) and Matute Villaseñor et al. (2009). Other studies like those conducted by Romero (2001), Valdés et al. (2009), Vera et al. (2010), or Solís and Díaz (2007) provide more detailed accounts of parenting practices at home regarding childcare in early years and its impact on child development. It is also worth noting the scarce attention researchers in Mexico pay to the study of socio-affective factors related to cognitive activities especially in early childhood, except among few others, for the work of Covarrubias (2006). As Quiñones and Fleer (2011) point out, it is important to look at how young children in contemporary societies make sense of everyday life subjective experiences as part of what shape socioemotional dimensions in them. Currently, there are major transformations in the characteristics and forms of life in Mexican families, transforming also the impact this has on children development, which points to the need of much more research in this area.

### 43.11 Concluding Remarks

Despite the long history of attempts to provide good care and education for early childhood in Mexico, formal education at the preschool level in Mexico became compulsory only until 2002, which creates new challenges in the Mexican education and research agenda. Different institutions have been created for care and education and a national Preschool Educational Program based on a competency model has been created where educators have the freedom to plan according to their own institutional and personal interests. Early childhood education continues to be instructive where the teacher is at the center of planning for children's education.

An important pedagogical activity in early childhood education is play. However, there is very little research on how play is understood in the Mexican context. The studies found and discussed showed how Mexican adults in some cultural communities do not tend to participate or get involved in play with children, which may be related to cultural practices in the organization of adult-child interactions. Further, in curriculum documents, play is seen as an individual endeavor rather than a collective enterprise between adults and other children. This shows the importance of conducting more research in play across cultural groups in urban, rural, and indigenous communities to better understand what play is and its cultural and developmental relevance.

Another important cultural practice which has been under-researched is how everyday storytelling and styles of conversation in Mexican families may relate to children's oral language development and how this can be valued in preschool programs as an important component of language and preliteracy development.

Finally, the importance of family in Mexican society should be acknowledged in the research and the importance on how family contributes in children's achievement in preschool and in children's learning and development. The research discussed in this chapter aims to give a wider picture of early childhood education in Mexico and to point out areas in which more basic and applied research is needed.

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