Creating safe and welcoming environments for immigrant children and families

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Currently, there are approximately 316 million residents in the United States, 80 million of whom are immigrants (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Within the entire U.S. population, 79 percent of these individuals speak English, while the other 21 percent speak a language other than English such as Spanish, Chinese, or Tagalog (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Among the immigrant population of school-age children (5 and older), 25.1 million people are considered Limited English Proficient (Zong & Batalova, 2015). Currently 17.4 million children live in a household where there is at least one immigrant parent (Zong & Batalova, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), there were more than 840,000 immigrant children who attended U.S. schools in 2014 and more than 4.6 million English language learners. The implications are clear: there are a large number of immigrant families and children in the U.S. for whom school systems must prepare and respond. The needs of immigrant families and children differ according to factors such as nation of origin, U.S. geographic region, and even the individual school or classroom in which children learn. Yet, there are some common factors and experiences that we can draw from to discuss how schools can develop welcoming environments for immigrant children and families.

School response to immigration

Historically, public schools in the U.S. have been institutions of oppression, xenophobia, assimilation, and Americanization for immigrant children (Olneck, 2004; Olsen, 1997). Some argue that for many immigrants, schools serve to “subtract” from education rather than to add or to build on a child’s experience (Valenzuela, 1999). Even today, while the multicultural education movement is theoretically strong, in practice, most schools continue to reflect the
dominant U.S. society’s hesitation to provide services to “new” populations through their administrative policies, teacher attitudes, and pedagogy. For example, as a result of schools discriminating against immigrant children who might be undocumented, last year, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice had to issue guidelines to clearly explain to school systems what documentation they may or may not demand of children to enroll (Phelps, 2014). Other recent examples include Somali immigrant students in a district in Minnesota reporting severe student-on-student harassment and disproportionate discipline (Department of Justice, n.d.); school districts not providing adequate English Language Learner services in places such as Boston and San Francisco (Department of Justice, n.d.); employment discrimination and unlawful retaliation toward Arabic-speaking faculty and staff in a school district in Michigan (Department of Justice, n.d.); and civil rights violations of Latino students in a parish of Louisiana (Department of Justice, n.d.). Native-born student peers may hold attitudes similar to their parents’, such as concerns that taxpayer dollars are being spent on “other people’s” kids (Olneck, 2004). Teachers may feel that they are being asked to perform yet more special services for students who they perceive as unmotivated and unwilling to conform (Olneck, 2004).

Schools’ practices and institutional attitudes then affect immigrant children’s academic performance and self-concept, and affect their parents’ willingness and ability to be involved in their children’s education (Gonzalez, Borders, Hines, Villalba, & Henderson, 2013; Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Olneck, 2004).

Issues faced by immigrant children and families

When immigrant children come to the U.S., they encounter acculturation problems, pre-migratory issues, and normal childhood concerns (Cardenas, Taylor, & Adelman, 1993; Tamer, 2014). They face stress due to discrimination from coming into a country where they are now
seen as part of a racial or ethnic minority group as well as the stress of acculturating to a new place with a different culture and rules (Koch, 2007; Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Tamer, 2014; Williams & Butler, 2003). These stressors can place a toll on students’ work when they focus time and effort into learning the new culture and not enough time in their studies. Students have to adjust to new learning and teaching styles (Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Williams & Butler, 2003). Immigrant students also typically face a language barrier within schools in the U.S. Most schools in the U.S. have documents (such as permission slips for field trips) that are not translated, have teachers who only speak English, lack access to translators or interpreters, and cannot support immigrant students effectively (Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Tamer, 2014; Teaching Tolerance, 2013; Williams & Butler, 2003).

Immigrant parents also face barriers when trying to become involved in their children’s studies. Immigrant families frequently hold cultural values such as respecting the authorities and professionals of the school (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Koch, 2007; Morrison & Bryan, 2014). Parents of immigrant students feel they should allow the teachers to perform their duties and do not feel the need to become involved with what is happening in the school. With a lack of competent interpreters, it is difficult for immigrant parents to attend parent conferences or open houses (Gonzalez et al., 2014; Koch, 2007). Immigrant parents are also likely to work more than one job and may fear deportation, if undocumented, and the school learned of their status (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Koch, 2007; Olneck, 2004; Tamer, 2014).

Exemplar Programs

Some schools and school districts are working diligently to improve the services they provide to immigrant children and families. The State of Minnesota has a long tradition of being supportive of immigrants. This state has recently seen an influx of immigrants from places such
as Somalia, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mexico, and Thailand (Hmong). Each of the Twin Cities school districts has taken great efforts to create welcoming environments for immigrant children and their families.

The Minneapolis Public Schools developed a program in partnership with The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools, 2013). This program focuses on improving the mental health of immigrant children and families, increasing the cultural competence of school staff and practitioners, and building relationships between schools and communities. Aspects of the program have included translation of documents, on-site interpreters, the formation of Community Advisory Groups with leaders from local communities, trainings for school and community members, direct clinical service, and outreach and classroom-based prevention programming. The administrators of the project emphasize the need for services to be culturally relevant and implemented at the systems level. They highlight the importance of de-emphasizing the western definition of health and mental health and work with community leaders to understand religious and cultural beliefs.

Just across the river, the St. Paul Public Schools English Language Learner (ELL) Department has also implemented practices that support immigrant children and families (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, 2015). In addition to ELL content for students at all levels, the program includes family activities and classes for parents. Students new to the district are assessed by school staff who are bilingual in the main languages spoken in the area (Hmong, Karen, Somali and Spanish). Special services are provided for refugee students whose education may have been interrupted. A variety of programs are offered at all grade levels, including dual-language programs. The program also includes cultural enrichment programs such as an after-school program for Hmong students called Culture, Language, Art ‘N Dance. In
an effort to engage parents, workshops are offered free transportation, food, and childcare. The ELL Department has developed a number of educational materials available in several languages that are available for sale. The ELL program is completely integrated into the district’s curriculum due to the large number of immigrant children enrolled. As a result, the St. Paul Public Schools have seen gains in standardized test scores in their ELL student population.

Recommendations

From the literature and from these model programs, we can see the need for schools to make systems-level, directed efforts at change. We repeatedly see the call for community partners and cultural brokers to be involved with school districts to promote understanding by school staff and involvement of parents (Koch, 2007; Olneck, 2004). It is imperative for staff to understand the cultural norms, practices, and values of immigrant communities in their schools, and for immigrant children and families to understand U.S. school norms and practices. We also see the importance of a variety of educational programs that honor students’ cultural backgrounds and build upon them in developmentally appropriate ways tailored to students’ needs (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Morrison & Bryan, 2014; Tamer, 2014).

Flexible and creative programs for parents are necessary. Families must believe that their involvement is important, valued, and that they will be able to make a contribution to their children’s education (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Olneck, 2004). Educators need to reach out and invite families to be involved. Educators should be creative, such as asking families for photos or items from home to be displayed at school; asking families to be resources about their culture; offering small groups with parents/guardians of different-aged children for mentoring; and empowering parents/guardians to feel that they have a role in planning their children’s future (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Teaching Tolerance, 2013). All communication with families such as
field trip permission forms, report cards, and so on should include translation and interpreters should be available for parent-teacher conferences, parent meetings at school, special education meetings, and other school based activities and meetings (Teaching Tolerance, 2013). When children are enrolled in school, registration forms should not require information regarding the child’s or families’ citizenship status (Phelps, 2014; Teaching Tolerance, 2013).

Further, school faculty and staff should be trained regarding cultural sensitivity and the background of the immigrant students and families they serve (Teaching Tolerance, 2013), with the focus being on the rich background and heritage that these children and families bring (Tamer, 2014). Often these trainings focus on teachers while other staff such as cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and school receptionists are ignored. For a school to be a safe and welcoming environment, all persons who represent the school and the district must receive the appropriate training. This includes the native-born peer children who attend the school as well as optional trainings for their parents. In-school curricula that focus on stereotype threat and improving race relations can help native-born peers understand and relate to their immigrant peers (Tamer, 2014). In addition, classes, workshops, or parent-teacher association meetings targeted for native-born parents may focus on improving the understanding of local immigrant population culture and values.

Some of these suggestions may be overwhelming to school districts in smaller areas or those who are just beginning to see a growth in their immigrant student population. However, all schools must be prepared to work with immigrant children and their families in culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate ways that promote positive interactions and relationships among school personnel, students, and families. There is much to be learned from school systems with a long history of supporting immigrant children and their families.
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