

BEYOND DEFICIT PARADIGMS: EXPLORING INFORMAL LEARNING OF IMMIGRANT PARENTS¹

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Abstract

This study explores how immigrant parents construct and mobilize their knowledge through informal learning to support their children's education. The study reveals that many participating immigrant parents learned the meaning of parental involvement primarily through trial and error. They learned Canadian curricula by using the Internet, passed on their first-language knowledge, instilled the best values of both Canadian and country-of-origin cultures, and learned how to advocate on behalf of their children, who were often marginalized at school. The results of this study illustrate the significance of informal learning about parental involvement by immigrant parents and the need for teachers and school administrators to recognize and make use of parent knowledge.

Résumé

Cette étude examine comment les parents immigrés construisent et mobilisent leurs connaissances par l'apprentissage informel en vue de soutenir l'éducation de leurs enfants. L'étude révèle que de nombreux participants ont appris leur rôle parental grâce à des pratiques d'essai et d'erreur. Ils ont appris les programmes canadiens en utilisant l'Internet, ont transmis leurs connaissances de leur langue maternelle, ont inculqué les meilleures valeurs des deux cultures, canadiennes et de leur pays d'origine, et ont appris à défendre les intérêts de leurs enfants, qui sont souvent marginalisés à l'école. Les résultats de cette étude illustrent l'importance de l'apprentissage informel sur la participation parentale par les parents immigrants et de la nécessité pour les enseignants et les administrateurs scolaires à reconnaître et à utiliser les connaissances des parents.

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Introduction

Parents’ active involvement in schools is a desired norm in North America. However, parental involvement is mainly a North American concept. It is neither expected nor practised in many immigrants’ countries of origin (Ogbu, 1995). Immigrant parents who attended a focus group discussion conducted by the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation believed that parental involvement was a Western idea, leading the study author to conclude that immigrant parents “need more outreach to involve them” (Naylor, 1993, as cited in Guo, Y., 2006, p. 83). In fact, for immigrant parents, involvement may have negative associations (Wan, 1994); Wan explains that in Hong Kong, Chinese parents seldom attend school functions because a school’s request to see parents means their children have gotten into trouble. Thus, negative social stigma associated with school communication may prevent some Chinese immigrant parents from interacting with schools and teachers when they come to Canada. Some research has suggested that whereas white parents are participating more in their children’s education, immigrant parents’ contacts with their children’s schools are actually decreasing (Moles, 1993).

Regrettably, many teachers incorrectly interpret a lack of parental involvement as a lack of interest and concern (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Guo, Y., 2006). Teachers may come to believe that immigrant parents do not care about their children’s education. Yet in studies, many immigrant parents indicate that they care passionately (Dyson, 2001; Guo, Y., 2007). Li (2002) concludes that cultural and linguistic differences prevent immigrant parents from intervening more often in their children’s education. When parents successfully intervene, it is often because they have used informal learning to familiarize themselves with the Canadian education system (Foley, 1999; Liu, 2007; Livingstone, 1999, 2006). This informal learning may, however, be unrecognized by teachers and school administrators. Recognition of parents’ informal learning is significant because it will help educators move beyond their deficit views of parents and understand the knowledge of immigrant parents.

Discourses on Immigrant Parents

For the most part, the literature on immigrant parents uses a deficit model, highlighting parents’ inability to speak English and their difficulties communicating with schools (Gibson, 2000; Naylor, 1993, as cited in Guo, Y., 2006; Ng, 2005). In their study of Ethiopian parents in Australia, for example, Bitew and Ferguson (2010) concluded that immigrant parents have little knowledge about the education system of their host countries, and that few are able to help with homework or course selection.

Research shows that immigrant parents view education differently than Western teachers. Ran (2001) studied the interaction of four Mainland Chinese families with three British teachers in parent–teacher meetings. Ran found that Chinese parents and British teachers failed to connect with each other due to differences in educational philosophies. Chinese parents wanted more homework and emphasized accuracy and perfect scores—the micro aspects of learning—whereas British teachers viewed error as a normal part of the learning process and focused on problem-solving and other macro aspects of learning.

Research has also explored how cultural differences impact home–school communication. Dyson (2001) and Li (2006) found that Chinese parents are reluctant

to challenge a teacher's authority because in Chinese culture, teachers are held in high esteem. Chinese parents see teachers as professionals with authority over their children's schooling. They believe that parents should not interfere with school processes. Yao (1988) explains that Asian parents usually do not initiate contact with schools because they see communication with teachers as a culturally disrespectful way of monitoring them. Espinosa (1995) found that most immigrant parents believe they are responsible for nurturing and educating their children at home, not at school.

Traditional models of family-school partnership include six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community (Epstein, 2001). The conventional North American model for parental involvement in education involves forms of parental participation in school-based activities and events. This model intends to promote equal opportunity, but in practice has many failings (Dehli, 1994; McLaren & Dyck, 2004). Barriers such as class and race play a role in parent-school interaction. These include educators' cultural biases and generally low expectations of immigrant parents (Jones, 2003; Ramirez, 2003). As Cline and Necochea (2001) observed of the involvement of Latino parents in the Lampoc United School District in California,

only parental involvement that is supportive of school policies and instructional practices are welcome here . . . parents whose culture, ethnicity, SES [socioeconomic status], and language background differ drastically from the white middle-class norms are usually kept at a distance, for their views, values, and behaviors seem "foreign" and strange to traditional school personnel. (p. 23)

Probing further, Lareau (2003) found that middle-class white and black parents were more strategic in intervening in their children's schools than were black working-class parents. Lareau also found that both middle- and working-class black parents were continually concerned with schools' racial discrimination. Perceived racial discrimination may have been a form of acquiescence among parents who were not strategic. In this regard, Canadian or U.S. models of parent involvement have tended to focus more on middle-class than working-class values and concerns and on experiences more relevant to parents of Anglo-Celtic descent than to those from non-English-speaking backgrounds. When immigrant parents do not conform to the dominant culture in their receiving country, schooling may end up undermining and subordinating parents' educative and child-rearing practices (Bernhard, Freire, Pacini-Ketchabaw, & Villanueva, 1998).

Knowledge Construction in Informal Learning

The knowledge that immigrants hold about their children is often unrecognized by teachers and school administrators (Jones, 2003). Non-recognition of immigrant parents can be attributed to misconceptions of difference and lack of knowledge about different cultures (Guo, S., 2009; Honneth, 1995). A deficit model of difference leads to the belief that difference is equal to deficiency, that the knowledge of others, particularly those from developing countries, is incompatible, inferior, and, hence, invalid (Abdi, 2007; Dei, 1996).

If school staff members hold these attitudes, even tacitly, they may fail to recognize and make use of the knowledge of immigrant parents.

The extent to which informal knowledge is gained and used may be modelled as transcultural knowledge construction, whereby individuals in immigrant societies of the new world change themselves by integrating diverse cultural lifeways into dynamic new ones. The resulting blended forms lead either to opposition and discrimination, or to cultural creativity and the integration of new knowledge within academic and societal positionings (Hoerder, Hébert, & Schmitt, 2006). For example, in her study of Chinese immigrants in Toronto, Liu (2007) reported that Chinese parents adapted to the Canadian way of educating children through informal learning.

Knowledge is power; knowledge is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated (McLaren, 2003). At the heart of the nature of knowledge as social relations is a notion of culture as a dynamic entity, as a way of using social, cultural, physical, spiritual, economic, and symbolic resources to make one's way in the world. Mobilizing such knowledge systematically in the classroom by teachers and administrators would promote insightful connections between curricular goals and immigrant students' experiences in countries of origin, in transition, and in residence in the local community, in turn making sense of transcultural flows and attachments to locality (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1992).

In addition to socially mediated forms of knowledge, immigrant parents' personal knowledge can play an important role in school relations. Personal knowledge refers to wisdom that comes with embodied meaning (Polanyi, 1958). A parent's personal knowledge is knowledge gained from lived experience in all aspects of life: at work, at play, with family and friends, and so on. It has temporal dimensions in that it resides in "the person's past experience, in the person's present mind and body, and in the person's future plans and actions" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 25). Parental knowledge includes that drawn from their own educational backgrounds, their professional and personal experiences of interacting with schools in their countries of origin, their current understanding of the host country's education system, their own struggles as immigrant parents, and their future aspirations for their children (Pushor, 2008).

One way that immigrant parents construct their knowledge of parental involvement is through informal learning. Informal learning refers to any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge, or skill outside the curricula of formal and non-formal educational institutions (Livingstone, 1999). Informal learning occurs through everyday activities, and can be intentional or unintentional, explicit or tacit. Elsdon (1995) maintains that the most important and valuable forms of informal learning are unpremeditated learning leading to personal growth, including confidence, empowerment, making constructive relationships, organizational learning, and ability and willingness to shoulder responsibility. He further states that these changes are usually transmitted through families, friends, and neighbours.

Livingstone (1999) highlights three major criticisms pertaining to research on informal learning: individualistic bias, dominant class bias, and learning question bias. The first criticism challenges an often implicit assumption that people learn most of what

they learn individually rather than in collective or relational contexts. The second criticism emerged because the vast majority of early research on informal learning was conducted with white, middle-aged, professional/managerial people and younger university students. Third, leading research questions related to informal learning were asked in biased ways from the dominant white, middle-class perspective. This study attempts to address these criticisms by exploring the informal learning² experience of immigrant parents in supporting their children's education.

Methodology

The parents were recruited through the Coalition for Equal Access to Education in Calgary, Alberta. This is a local umbrella organization of community agencies, groups, and individuals concerned with the current state of ESL instruction in the K–12 public education system and its consequences for immigrant children and families. The Coalition is committed to working with community, education, and government stakeholders to promote access to quality, equitable education for culturally diverse children and youth. With the assistance of the Coalition's staff member, the researcher sent a recruitment notice to the Coalition's e-mail list. The researcher also participated in several community functions and parent leadership workshops organized by the Coalition in order to recruit participants. Forty parents were targeted and 38 agreed to participate. The parents who participated in this study had arrived in Calgary from 15 countries, including China, Korea, Vietnam, Nepal, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Algeria, Ghana, Somalia, Sudan, Colombia, Belize, and Suriname. They spoke 23 different languages. All participants held credentials from their countries of origin. Twenty-five of these parents had bachelor degrees, 12 had master's degrees, and one had a high-school diploma. Occupations held in countries of origin included university instructor, teacher, engineer, social worker, principal, and manager. Once in Canada, most experienced downward mobility; they became community liaison workers, cashiers, production workers, or unemployed. Some parents volunteered in Canadian schools, participated in school councils, or worked in schools as lunch supervisors or teacher assistants. Some had observed teachers working with their children and were able to share these experiences.

Semi-structured, individual interviews with parents were used to elicit their perspectives on what teachers should know about their children. Several open-ended questions were used. These questions were designed to draw out rich descriptive data on parents' experiences with their children's teachers and schools, and their suggestions about what teachers need to know about their children, community, culture, and values to develop more effective home-school partnerships. Great care was taken in these interviews to inquire into how parents' knowledge of Canadian education was acquired, constructed, and activated. Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes.

2 Some schools in Calgary offered workshops to teach immigrant parents how to get involved in their children's education in Canada. These workshops could be considered as a formal way to learn parental involvement. This study, however, focused on parents' informal learning, which occurred outside these formal educational institutions.

An inductive analysis strategy was applied to the interview data throughout the study as the data were collected and processed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). This was accomplished by searching for domains that emerged from the data rather than imposing categories developed prior to data collection. Domains are large cultural categories that contain smaller categories/subcategories and whose relationships are linked by a semantic relationship (Spradley, 1980). Demographic information such as gender, level of education, and cultural background was also used to examine the emerging categories/domains. All findings were further analyzed in terms of different kinds of informal learning. These findings were not intended to generalize the experiences of all immigrant parents in Canada, but rather to provide insights into the complex cultural, linguistic, and religious issues that were salient for these particular participants.

Findings

Findings revealed that immigrant parents constructed and mobilized their knowledge in five aspects of informal learning: (1) learning school expectations by interacting with and observing other parents, (2) self-teaching curricula by using the Internet, (3) passing on first-language knowledge by informal teaching, (4) instilling hybridity of two cultures by informal teaching, and (5) advocacy and capacity building for immigrant students by using their parents' knowledge.

Learning School Expectations by Interacting with and Observing Other Parents

In the Canadian education system, teachers typically hold expectations that parents will participate in school events and show concerns for their children's educational success (Epstein, 2001). Many participants reported that they were unaware of the expectations held by teachers and public schools in Canada. For example, Tyrone,³ a Sudanese parent, said:

Like in my country, parents drop their kids in schools and then they study. Parents don't need to worry. They don't have to follow up with the teacher. We trust teachers and we trust schools. Here, education is 50 and 50, 50 for parents and 50 for teachers. You have to follow up with the school, you have to ask questions, and you have to volunteer.

Tyrone explained that many of the parents from Sudan, like him, simply did not know that parents ought to follow up with the school. Such unawareness was shared by many other participants. For example, in response to the researcher's question about volunteering in schools, Shaoli Ma, a Chinese immigrant, said, "I did not know. I did not understand it at all. When we first came, we didn't know anybody here." Both Tyrone and Shaoli reported that they learned the importance of communicating with teachers and volunteering in schools by interacting with and observing other parents. For these and other participants, these activities resulted in a big transformation in their beliefs about parents' presence in school. Daniel Yang said:

3 All participant names in the article are pseudonyms.

I did not know that I had to volunteer in schools. Actually, I tried not to go to school. If my son's teacher asked me to go to school, I started to worry right away. My son might misbehave in school. I was thinking what was wrong with him.

Daniel explained that there are negative associations to parents' presence in schools in Chinese culture. Chinese parents seldom attend school functions because a school's request to see parents means their children have gotten into trouble. This finding was consistent with Wan's (1994) study of Chinese immigrant parents in the United States.

For some parents, efforts to become more involved were not positive experiences. After learning the importance of parent-teacher conferences, Nicole Liang initially went to every one. However, sometimes she felt she was not welcome by some teachers. She said, "Parents will meet the subject teacher individually. Some teachers are good and warm-hearted, but others are not. My son's arts teacher did not like to talk to me." After a while, Nicole stopped going to parent-teacher conferences. She explained that she wanted the teachers to give more homework to her child, but she felt "it is useless to go to these meetings . . . because it can't solve the real problem." She did not feel encouraged by the school administrator. She cited one incident which took place in a meeting organized for the ESL parents:

I want to be involved, but the principal said: "don't challenge the teachers." It was embarrassing. I remembered the last meeting they held particularly for ESL parents. The school invited the parents for suggestions. Chinese parents, nearly half of the immigrant parents, suggested that the teacher give more homework for the students and check the homework. But the school argued that they want the students to learn by themselves. Students should be encouraged and find homework themselves, or the parents should assign homework and monitor them.

Nicole explained that she, along with other parents in her son's school, viewed homework as a way of fostering good study habits for their children and communicating with schools (see Li, 2002 for a similar finding). Nicole reported that she did not feel the parents had challenged the teachers, as the principal had suggested, but were simply expressing their views of education, which differed from those of the teachers and the principal. She perceived the principal as having "an attitude problem."

Learning Canadian Curricula by Using the Internet

Many immigrant parents reported using the Internet as the most important means of learning about Canadian curricula. For example, Liming Wang described how she had relied on the Internet to learn Grade 1 math curricula to support her daughter:

I did a Google search on the Internet. The key words I Googled was Grade 1 math or Grade 1 patterns. I was looking for teachers' instruction or some information from the Board of Education. I wanted to know what their expectations were . . . In that way, I have some directions and how I can help Trish [her daughter].

Liming explained it was difficult for her to help her daughter since there were no textbooks and she did not know what her daughter was learning in school. She attempted to communicate with her daughter’s teacher on a daily basis, but felt turned away by the teacher. Instead, she turned to the Internet for help. She went on to describe how she had to learn Canadian curricula in Chinese first before she could help her daughter:

I did not know the geography of Canada. I went to the Internet and found the map of Canada. I had to learn it in Chinese first. Then I came back to the English website and read it again until I totally understood. We wouldn’t expect the child to understand all of them. I just chose the easy part and explained it to Trish.

Liming also bought a puzzle of a Canadian map. She played the puzzle with her daughter. When her daughter started a magnet project, Liming bought three shapes of magnets. She explained:

I went outside and got lots of soil, then used the bar magnet to attract all the iron chips, put them in the fabric paper, and clean them, but it was not successful. Later on, I thought maybe we can just play a game. I used a very huge cardboard and we drew a lot of pictures on the cardboard. My design was a kind of animal adventure. You would leave from the start to the end, but on your way, there were some problems and you had to solve these problems. The first problem was that there was a dig. I just used the paper cup to dig a hole and there were some metal things in it. You had to use your bar magnet to pull them out. Another problem was that I used my daughter’s plastic bows to make a necklace and then used a staple to stabilize it. That would be the metal.

The examples above illustrate how Liming Wang used her own resourcefulness to support her daughter’s learning of academic language and content. At the same time, co-learning occurred, whereby she used her daughter’s curricula to simultaneously develop and enhance her own learning.

Fangfang Li, a former teacher in China with a master’s degree in science, on the other hand, used the Internet to peer behind the façade of school practices and curricula. She said:

Last month, my daughter had to write a report about space. She had no idea what the nine planets are, especially in English. She told me what they did in class was to look at some pictures. I Googled the curriculum in her grade and found out what they need to know about space in Grade 6.

From the Internet, Fangfang Li found that one of the requirements for students was to identify examples of differences among the nine planets. She saw contradictions between the documented official curriculum and the curriculum she heard about from her daughter. Unsatisfied with what her daughter learned in school, she took her daughter to an interactive science museum, taught her the concept of space in Chinese, listened with her to a guest speaker who was talking about space in English, and did many hands-on activities with

her. In this way, Fangfang used her prior educational background to supplement what she perceived as lacking in her daughter's science class.

Passing on First-Language Knowledge by Informal Teaching

Thirty-six out of 38 parents in the study reported that their children's schools often ignore their children's previous language knowledge. Parents, therefore, informally taught their first languages to their children at home. The parents provided a number of reasons for passing on their linguistic values to their children. For some, teaching and preserving the first language at home was an important means of staying connected to relationships, cultural values, and identities forged in their home countries: "I want my children to keep up with Punjabi, so that they can talk to their grandparents" (Nim, Pakistan). "Language is culture. It is my language that makes my colour, who I am, and my culture" (Tamika, Somali).

Watching her children's gradual decline in the Somali language, Tamika felt the threat of her children losing their identity and culture, a concern echoed by most of the participants. Another parent, Kamal, went on to stress the political dimension that makes it even more powerful for the parent to stay connected with their first language:

Bangladesh used to be part of Pakistan. At that time the ruler wanted to impose Urdu as the national language. We are speaking Bengali, so Bengali people fought for their right to speak Bengali. Many people were shot. People gave their lives for the language.⁴

Other parents listed more pragmatic reasons for keeping up the home language. Sana (Pakistan) said, "I think these days having more than one language is a good skill. You know our country is growing and there are many immigrants coming. I think most jobs will require additional languages." And Parveen (Nepal) offered, "One of the reasons I help him [her son] maintain Nepalese is that he can translate the concepts in Nepalese into English, so it will help him with his school learning." Sana perceived that acquiring different languages would be useful for future employment in a global world. Parveen realized the first language is an important learning tool for transferring the concepts from first- to second-language education.

4 Kamal was referring to the Bengali Language Movement. Bengali is the primary language spoken in Bangladesh. In 1948, when Bangladesh was East Pakistan, the Government of Pakistan ordained Urdu as the sole national language. This new law sparked extensive protests among the Bengali-speaking majority of East Pakistan, including a protest organized by student demonstrators in 1952. The movement reached its climax when police killed student demonstrators on February 21. This day has been declared as International Mother Language Day by UNESCO. For Kamal, his native language represents his culture and identity, as well as a tribute to the ethno-linguistic rights of people around the world. Kamal argued that an individual's right to use and learn his/her own native language is a basic human right (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2006).

Instilling Hybridity of Two Cultures by Informal Teaching

Beyond maintaining their first language, some Chinese parents in the study insisted that their children ought to retain their Chinese identity. Fangfang Xing put it nicely:

That has to be Chinese identity. Even you are in Canada or whatever, the first thing is that you are Chinese. As Chinese, you have to know as much as possible about Chinese culture, literature, arts, every aspect, and Chinese lifestyle. That is the first thing. The second is how to combine two different things and how to bridge two cultures.

Fangfang Xing provided specific examples of good values of both cultures:

The Chinese people are self-disciplined. They set up a goal and they will stick to that goal and work hard toward the goal . . . The Canadian people are open-minded and creative. In China, the teacher intends to impose his or her values on the kids. But the teacher seldom says what is right and what is wrong. Whatever you said, the teacher will praise you. I think that is good to build kids' confidence.

Fangfang was comparing the good values of Chinese culture and Canadian culture. She hoped her daughter was able to "combine the good values of both cultures and to be a good person that influences the people around her."

Similarly, Mary Li wanted to pass on important values of both cultures to her children. She said:

I like Canadian culture. People play hard, but they also work hard. It is the way to be responsible. I want them to learn the skills and to be independent. I also want them to have fun because my generation focus on working hard. I feel guilty if I enjoy myself. I think people need to find the passion about life . . . I like the way that Chinese people maintain harmony with their family and community . . . I don't want them to be too focused on individualism.

Fangfang and Mary hoped to instill in their children the best values of Chinese culture, such as self-discipline, work ethics, and maintaining harmony with the family and community, and to balance these with the best Canadian cultural values, such as open-mindedness, creativity, responsibility, and enjoyment of life. These parents showed awareness that part of their children's growth lay in their ability to draw on the best of both Chinese and Canadian culture.

Advocacy and Capacity Building for Immigrant Students by Using their Parents' Knowledge

Many participants reported that despite the promotion of multiculturalism in Canadian schools, their children continued to be the victims of demeaning treatment by some Canadian students motivated by ignorance and stereotypes. The participants learned different strategies to intervene in their children's schools. For example, Shin stated that in Korean culture, parents are not supposed to take the initiative to communicate with

teachers. She learned from her neighbour that in Canada, if parents have concerns, they have the right to approach their children's teachers. Shin reported that although her English "was not good," she approached her daughter's teacher immediately when an incident happened to her daughter:

When my daughter was erasing the board, behind her a student said to my daughter, "Korean student, you have to go back to your country. Why are you here?" She heard that because she was the only one in the classroom, but she couldn't recognize that voice. She turned around, but she couldn't find out who said that. She was very upset.

Shin explained to the teacher what happened and how upset her daughter was. She was satisfied that the teacher followed up with a whole class discussion about diversity and the harm of racism and anti-immigrant sentiments. Shin was willing to change a cultural practice from her country of origin and learned to advocate on her daughter's behalf.

Aneeka took a different approach. When her son was called "Osama bin Laden" by one of his peers in Grade 5, Aneeka advised her son to ignore such racist comments:

My child told me, "Somebody called me Osama bin Laden." I asked him, "Are you?" "No, Mom." "Don't worry. You know you are not anything like that. You are a good Muslim boy. You believe in peace. You are not a terrorist. Don't let them make fun of you."

Aneeka stated how stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslim immigrants sometimes create low self-esteem among Muslim immigrant children, and she stressed the importance of building her son's confidence. She helped her son overcome adversity, teasing, and stereotypes from classmates by cultivating the child's spiritual (Muslim) identity. Unlike Shin, who learned to advocate for her daughter at school, Aneeka turned to her spiritual resources to develop her son's confidence at home.

Parveen encouraged her son, aged 12, to participate in the "Write Off Racism Poetry Contest" organized by ACCESS, Canadian Learning Television in Edmonton. She was proud that her son's poem (included below) ranked fourth among the 12–18 age group. She said, "He sometimes feels discriminated against as an ESL student. This poem is really related to what he is going through." The poem reflected on her son's actual experience of discrimination as an immigrant student. Her son was ridiculed about his phenotype and his English ability by his peers, who gave little thought to his character, personality, or feeling. She encouraged her son to think positively. She told her son: "You have visited so many countries and you know different languages. Respect what you have in a positive way." In this way, Parveen taught her son how to advocate not only for himself, but also for other ESL students who might share similar experiences.

Discussion

Impact of Prior Knowledge on Immigrant Parents' Participation in School Activities

The results of the study indicate that many immigrant parents learned the meanings of parental involvement primarily through trial and error practices. Both Tyrone and Daniel

Mirror Image

Whatever you call me,
 Different could be my name;
 The color you see in my skin-outside,
 Might not be your same;
 But don't create a wall in between
 Thinking me a "creature new"
 If you look deep down your heart—
 You'll find—I'm you!!

You might be fair Snow-white of my fairytale
 I might be black demon or brown Gin,
 but Oh well,
 Skin is our armor; not what we really are,
 Same red blood we have and salty tear.
 Don't pull a curtain between us two—
 If you wipe clouds of your eyes
 You'll see—I'm you!!

I'm alien in your country;
 so you'll be in mine.
 English is my second language, but I've an open mind.
 Don't hit me with Racism—thinking "Me" not "You"
 If you ask alone with your heart
 You'll find I'm you!!!

expressed that in their countries of origin, teachers assume full responsibility of children's education at school. Given this prior knowledge, they did not attend parent-teacher conferences, did not do volunteer work, and did not offer other assistance and support at school. Drawing from observations and informal learning from other parents, they started to follow up with the teachers. These examples support Hannerz's (1992) thesis that immigrant parents treat culture as dynamic and are willing to make changes to support their children's education. This finding is also consistent with Liu's (2007) study of Chinese immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area. Liu found that all immigrant parents in her study reported enormous learning in adapting to the Canadian way of educating children.

The Doublespeak of Parental Involvement in Canadian Schools

Other parents in our study engaged in more critical forms of learning. Nicole, for example, recognized a contradiction in schools: teachers and administrators encourage parental involvement, but ultimately hold on to knowledge and authority, positioning parents as receivers of knowledge (MacLure & Walker, 2000). Nicole learned that only certain types of questions are welcome by school administrators. The request of Nicole and other ESL parents for more homework was perceived as a challenge to teachers' authority. Parents learned that, unlike in their countries of origin, in Canada it is usually parents who take the initiative to contact the school if they have any concerns regarding their children. However, when they initiated parent-teacher meetings to express their concerns, they came to realize

that frequent visits to the school are often unwelcome by teachers. Some parents in this study had to learn to navigate the doublespeak of the Canadian education system: parental involvement is encouraged, but only forms of parental involvement that support existing school policies and instructional practices are actually welcome in schools (Auerbach, 2007; Cline & Necochea, 2001). As López (2001) notes, “parent involvement has become a privileged domain signified by certain legitimate acts,” such as helping with homework, attending parent–teacher conferences, and participating in fundraising activities (p. 417). In activities such as attending parent–teacher conferences, “consensus and cooperation are assumed; parent involvement is treated as a social fact on neutral terrain rather than as a socially constructed phenomenon on the contested terrain of schooling” (Auerbach, 2007, p. 251). This alleged neutrality and universality fails to acknowledge immigrant parents’ unique strategies for engaging in their children’s education, and the broader social inequalities in which immigrant home–school relations are embedded. The unequal distribution of economic, human, cultural, and social capital, in addition to schools’ devaluing of immigrant parent knowledge, constrains parents’ relations with schools (Auerbach, 2007; Bourdieu, 1986).

Active and Skilled Agents of Parents’ Own Learning to Support Their Children’s Education

Moving beyond deficit models of immigrant parental involvement, the study findings reveal that immigrant parents are important constructors of knowledge about children, teaching, and learning. The immigrant parents’ stories demonstrate how they were active and skilled agents of their own learning—learning they undertook to support their children’s education. As highly educated professionals before immigration, many parents reported that the Internet was the most important source of learning about the school system, curricula, and services. This finding is consistent with the results of Liu’s (2007) study, in which immigrants reported using the Internet as the most important means of learning and exchanging information on child education. Concerned with the lack of textbooks and other learning materials from the school, some immigrant parents in our study taught themselves Canadian curricula in their first languages, then used what they had learned to teach their children in both their first languages and in English. Participants sought to instill the best values of both Canadian and their country-of-origin cultures, continued to teach first languages to their children, and learned how to advocate on behalf of their children, who were often marginalized at school. In this sense, their learning was informal, intentional, and emancipatory (Cunningham, 2000; Freire, 1970; Livingstone, 1999).

Immigrant Parents Supporting Their Children to Combat Racism

Early studies have shown that immigrant parents’ learning is self-directed and deliberate, incorporating definite goals to support their children’s learning at home and to build their children’s capacities for combating discrimination and racism (Dei, 1996; Tough, 1971, 1978). Parents in this study used a variety of approaches to help their children construct a counter-discourse to racial, cultural, linguistic, and religious forms of discrimination. For example, Shin’s narratives speak powerfully and poignantly about the ways in which, despite her limited English-language skills, she attempted to advocate for more inclusive

schooling practices for immigrant children (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000). She turned to her neighbour for strategies of approaching teachers and constructed her transcultural knowledge by integrating a Canadian way of communicating with teachers (Hoerder, Hébert, & Schmitt, 2006). Aneeka lamented that most of what the Canadian public and Canadian teachers and students know about Muslim immigrants is based solely on biased media coverage. Aware of the negative stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists, created by a post-9/11 narrative (McDonough & Hoodfar, 2005), she focused on countering these stereotypes by stressing the nature of peace in Islam. She stated: "My religion is Islam. Islam means peace. I teach my children to love peace, to respect elders, to respect teachers and parents." She activated her personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1958), particularly her spiritual resources, to help her son overcome discrimination. Parveen, with a master's degree in creative writing, used her parenting knowledge (Pushor, 2008) and her educational background to help her son develop a sense of resilience. Her son's poem illustrates how he learned to resist racism and its hostilities, and balance struggle with hope. Shin, Aneeka, and Parveen all demonstrated that advocating for their children and teaching their children to self-advocate in the face of racism was another focus of parents' informal learning about parental involvement.

The Significance of Informal Learning and of an Expansion of Parental Involvement

The results of this study illustrate the significance of informal learning by immigrant parents (Livingstone, 1999). The informal learning was adopted by some immigrant parents in the study as a way of coping with various barriers they faced in support of their children's education in the different cultural environment. For example, Liming Wang reported how she felt she was turned away by her daughter's teacher although she attempted to communicate with the teacher on a daily basis. This negative experience made her think about how to strike a balance between the invitation to be involved and the danger of over-involvement. This example demonstrates that knowing how to be involved is one of those subtle feats of cultural capital that Bourdieu (1986), Lareau (2003), and others have described as being at the heart of supporting a child through schooling.

Furthermore, the results of this study illustrate the significance of the need to expand conventional models of parental involvement to recognize immigrant parent engagement (López, 2001). In the Canadian system of education, teachers typically expect parents to participate in school events and show concern for their children's educational success (Epstein, 2001). The study suggests that even though immigrant parents did not volunteer at school functions or attend school council meetings, they supported their children's learning at home in the form of passing on cultural and linguistic values. The transmission of cultural and linguistic values has rarely been documented in the literature as a type of parental involvement (see López for an exception). Immigrant parents in Lopez's study took their children to work with them in the fields and taught them to appreciate the value of their education, thus transmitting appropriate socio-cultural values as a type of parental involvement. Building upon Lopez's study, this research suggests that the immigrant parents saw transmitting their first-language knowledge, negotiating the terrain of both home and school cultures, and helping their children combat various forms of racism as important forms of involvement that their children needed. These hidden forms

of parental involvement expand narrow conceptions of parent–school relations that tend to reinforce and serve the interests of white, middle-class families. This significant expansion to parental involvement has important implications for Canadian schools and education practitioners.

Implications for Practice

This study contributes valuable information for any school administrators, teachers, or education policy makers interested in enhancing their ability to work sensitively and effectively with students and parents from cultures different from their own. Several practical recommendations for educational personnel are made to show how educators can connect to the cultural spaces and images of schooling and learning that are out there in communities of new Canadians.

In this rapidly changing social context, schools need to better address the needs of students and parents from a multicultural, multilingual population. Guo and Mohan (2008) suggest that educators and administrators need to recognize that educational tasks may be given culturally divergent interpretations; that is, teachers and parents may have culturally divergent views of the educational agenda such as homework. Schools need to learn immigrant parents' views on education and cultural differences on home–school communication (Dyson, 2001; Li, 2006; Ran, 2001). Schools need to understand that cultural differences in conceptions regarding schools, teachers, and education actually underlie often conflicting views of parental involvement between immigrant parents and North American educators. Schools, therefore, need to become learning organizations “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

Incorporating the home cultures of immigrant parents into the school curriculum challenges educators to rethink predetermined involvement typologies that cause immigrant parents to be labelled as unwilling or uninvolved (Dyson, 2001; López, 2001). For example, parents may visit the classroom to share their knowledge (Pushor, 2008) or students may be given homework assignments that require them to interview their parents or their grandparents about their communities or their immigration experiences. This kind of activity helps to acknowledge parents' cultural values and make parents feel they can provide valuable contributions. This also helps students make better connections between the school curriculum and their personal experiences, which in turn will help students succeed academically.

Validating the first languages of diverse families is another approach to engage immigrant parents. An example would be the use of dual-language books, where the text is in both English and another language. A kindergarten teacher, a graduate student in my course, invited parents from 11 different languages to be part of a family reading program in her classroom. Every Friday, she allocated 25 minutes at the drop-off time for parent volunteers to read to small groups of children, often from dual-language books, on their own or with a partner parent reading the English text (Sarah Harrison, personal

communication, December 16, 2010). The teacher reported the increasing appreciation of the children toward their classmates' multilingual abilities, as well as how much the parents of these children valued the opportunity to share their first languages and be part of the learning community.

Conclusion

A more effective and inclusive model of parental participation would need to recognize a full range of socio-educational norms, values, and cultural knowledge in the school community, which includes comprehensive understanding of the contribution of immigrant parents to their children's education. Instead of trying to get immigrant parents involved in traditionally sanctioned ways, schools should recognize the unique ways in which immigrant parents are already involved in their children's education. Educators often focus on what is lacking in immigrant families rather than on the potential resources upon which they can build. Schools and teachers must take the initiative if the resource of immigrant parent participation is to be fully used. The work of achieving social justice must involve immigrant parents and immigrant parents' voices must be heard.

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