Understanding Socio-emotional Needs of English Language Learners' Families: Implications for Parent Engagement

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Diversity in Schools

- The population of children from immigrant families is growing faster than any other group of children in the United States (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008).

- Recent U.S. Department of Education statistics reveal that over 5 million school-age children are categorized as English Learners (ELs) (NCELA, 2011).

Who are EL students?

- EL students have traditionally been defined as children whose English has not yet developed to the point where they can take full advantage of instruction in English (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2009).

- While not all EL children are from immigrant families (i.e., their parents are born outside the U.S.), there tends to be high overlap between these populations.

Characteristics of EL families

- EL children are more likely to have parents with lower formal education levels than their non-EL counterparts (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Hewantoro, 2005).

- EL children are more likely to come from low-income families (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006).

- These factors, in combination, often lead to lower levels of academic achievement in EL students (Jensen, 2008).

- Importance of not stereotyping EL kids

Characteristics of Immigrant Families

- Separation from nuclear and extended family

- Trauma related to immigration

- Linguistic barriers

- Acculturative Stress

- Financial barriers

- Discrimination

- The immigrant paradox

Separation

- While immigration often results in predictable separation from extended family, 85% of immigrant children and adolescents have been separated from one or both parents for an extended period of time (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002).

- This puts children and adolescents at risk for depression and other mental health problems.

- Disrupts family dynamics and traditions.

Separation *(continued)*

- Reliance on extended family is critical part of social fabric in many societies (e.g., most of Asia and Central/South America).

- Emotional and tangible support are either severed or severely limited as a result of immigration.

- Technology aids in connection but is also a financial stressor.

Trauma

- Many immigrants have escaped trauma associated with conditions in their native countries (e.g., war, persecution, natural disasters) that were motivations for leaving.

- Refugees are at higher risk for having survived ongoing torture in their homelands, putting them at high risk for serious mental health problems such as Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression(Buhin, 2013).

Trauma *(continued)*

- Many immigrants have experienced trauma as part of their immigration experience (e.g., rape, human trafficking, physical abuse, deprivation of food and water, harsh transportation conditions).

- In 25% of instances, physical symptoms are displayed as a result (in addition to psychological symptoms such as PTSD).

Linguistic Barriers

- Degree of fluency in English varies in immigrants (as do patterns of use of native vs. newly acquired languages).

- Learning a second language is time intensive, especially for adolescents and adults.

- Most immigrants feel a sense of urgency about learning English and great levels of stress in being unable to use it fluently.

Linguistic barriers *(continued)*

- Language barriers are typically the most commonly cited reasons that immigrant parents do not attend school events or seek out community related resources (Vera et al., 2012).

- Immigrant parents assume that translation and interpreter services are NOT available (even when they are).

Acculturative Stress

- Acculturation is the process of adapting to the host culture (Berry, 1980).

- A dynamic, interactional process (the attitudes of the host and the host culture play significant roles).

- Four acculturation statuses may exist: assimilation, separation, marginalization, or integration (biculturalism).

Acculturative Stress *(continued)*

- Acculturative stress is defined as stressors associated with adapting to a new culture, such as language barriers, new customs/traditions, discrimination.

- For parents, acculturative stress can be generated by learning the rules and expectations of new school systems, which are often very different from rules and expectations of schools in their home country.

Acculturative Stress correlates

- Psychological well-being (both frequency of symptoms and life satisfaction)

- Financial opportunities

- Family cohesion and stability

- Self-esteem

- Academic performance

Financial barriers

- Immigrants are overrepresented in statistics on families living below the poverty level.

- 23% of Latin American immigrants live below the poverty level, 16% of African immigrants, 12% of Asian immigrant, and 9% of European immigrants (compared to 12% of non-immigrants).

Poverty affects:

- Where and how you live

- Safety of environment

- Access to recreation/community resources

- Amount of time parents spend with their children

- Quality of family time

- Future orientation and aspirations of children

Discrimination

- Ranges from negative stereotypes, job discrimination, bullying, to hate crimes

- Different immigrant groups experience varying levels of discrimination (and types)

- Many immigrants have no previous experience with being "minority" group members

- Accumulation of discriminatory events results in avoidance of interactions with mainstream organizations such as schools, libraries, etc.

Discrimination *(continued)*

- Children lack the cognitive and social resources to understand and cope with discrimination (and sometimes the ability to label it as such).

- Disconnect between how parents socialize their kids to handle discrimination and how kids actually handle it.

- Discrimination experiences have inverse relationship with a variety of mental and physical health outcomes.

The Immigrant Paradox

- As they enter American schools, newcomer immigrant children tend to be both optimistic about their future and engaged in learning (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

- Over time, however, this engagement can become precarious and vulnerable to change. Despite their initial academic advantage, for nearly all immigrant groups, length of residence in the United States appears to be associated with declines in academic achievement and aspirations, and in physical and psychological health (Aretakis et al., 2015).

- Paradox is particularly seen in health and academic outcomes between first and second generation.

Implications for education

- Stereotype threat (Steele, 1997). EL students can often feel that people expect them to fail, the stereotype gets activated in high stakes testing situations, and the stress created from the idea of fulfilling the stereotype, results in impaired performance.

- Stereotype threat effects have been seen in girls, ethnic minority groups, and immigrants.

- Effects can be blocked by having curriculum content that shows achievements of marginalized groups.

Implications *(continued)*

- School engagement is one of the strongest predictors of academic success, but for EL kids this can be compromised when they feel that the school is not "theirs."

- Academic self-efficacy, another strong predictor of academic success, is fostered by direct and vicarious experiences with success. If EL kids do not have similar peer groups, they are denied access to a powerful source of confidence (i.e., role models).

Implications *(continued)*

- Social support and peer relations, important moderators of stressors EL kids face, must be made available and enhanced, respectively. Having special social opportunities for EL kids can foster support and peer relations.

- Examples of culture club, student ambassador programs

Implications for Parent Participation

Parent participation in educational activities is complex for parents of EL kids:

- Parents' experiences with the teachers, counselors, and administrators at their children's school set the stage for whether home-school communication and volunteering will be initiated or continued (Ariza, 2010). If a parent of an EL child feels unwelcome, it may decrease the likelihood of a parent continuing to attend school events.

- Immigrant parents often have even greater aspirations for their children's educational success than do U.S.-born parents (Ramirez, 2008; Kao & Tienda, 1995) regardless of parents' own level of formal education. The myth that parents of EL children simply do not value education is without merit.

Implication for Parents *(continued)*

- Parents' cultural beliefs about their role in the education of their children can also be a factor in limiting their involvement. In some cultures, asking a teacher questions about his or her methods or assessment of a child would be considered disrespectful (De Gaetano, 2007).

- In many other countries, teachers are highly respected and parents aim to not interfere with the way teachers do their jobs (Sosa, 1997). Thus, the mainstream cultural expectation in the United States—that parents are active advocates for their children within the school—can be a cultural incongruity for many parents of EL children.

Parent Engagement

- How does parent engagement differ from parent involvement?
- Social capital & voice
- Issues of empowerment and connection to other parents are core factors of social capital
- Parents of EL students often do not have perception of themselves as having equal standing to BOTH majority parents and school staff

Mechanisms to increase engagement

- Understanding parent engagement is related to what we know about student engagement.
- Just as students need opportunities to be involved, so do parents, but not limited to events that merely serve the needs of the school.
- Just as students need opportunities where their unique abilities have a purpose (e.g., student ambassador programs), so do parents.

Engagement of EL parents

- Parent ambassador programs

- Parent Mentor programs (Hong, 2010)

- Parent Leadership Institutes

- Bilingual Parent Leadership

- Integrated Parent organizations

Remember

- Things do not necessarily get better over time (the immigrant paradox). EL students and their parents need support even after they are exited out of language support programs.

- Schools play a powerful role in shaping the experience of immigrant and/or EL children and their families in this country. They either reinforce experiences that they are having in the larger community or serve as counter-examples.

Discussion

- What ideas do you take away from this presentation and conversation that could be implemented in your school environments?

- What are challenges/barriers that you think exist with respect to successful implementation of support programs for Els and their families?

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