

Strategies and Practices for Working with Immigrant Families in Early Education Programs



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Immigrants make up at least 15 percent of the population in over 50 countries (Matthews & Ewen 2006). In 2006, some 191 million people, or three percent of the world population, did not live in the country in which they were born; this percentage doubled since 1975 (United Nations Population Division 2006). In 2005, the majority of immigrants lived in Europe and North America (United Nations Population Division 2005).

Families with young children leave their countries of origin and immigrate to countries with different cultures, languages, and economic systems. They immigrate for a variety of reasons, ranging from better economic and educational opportunities to freedom from war and oppression. The experience of immigrating to a new country and culture can be both positive and negative. Families may experience relief from dangerous or economically challenging situations in their countries of origin but may also struggle in the new country to learn a new language, find employment, manage life with smaller kin networks, and generally integrate into a new society.

Family researchers in the United States and abroad note that early childhood education (ECE) programs should be a crucial aspect of immigrant families' integration and inclusion in new societies (Vandenbroeck 2006; Romero 2008). Despite this, studies show that at ages 3 and 4, children in immigrant families in the United States are less likely to be enrolled in preschool than their nonimmigrant, white counterparts (Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney 2006). For example, Magnuson, Lahaie, and Waldfogel (2006) found that in the year prior to kindergarten, 58 percent of immigrant children in the United States attend preschool or Head Start compared to 73 percent among children of native-born parents. In Belgium, only 14 percent of child care centers have immigrant children enrolled, despite the fact that 45 percent of all children in Belgium

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have immigrant parents (Vandenbroeck et al. 2008). In the Netherlands and Norway, only 50 percent of children from immigrant families are enrolled in early childhood education, with this figure being higher among children with non-immigrant parents (OECD 2006).

The aforementioned data point to the need to think in a systematic way about how early childhood centers in the United States and abroad can develop programs that effectively support immigrant children's development and families' integration into new societies. Consequently, our study (Vesely & Ginsberg, forthcoming), funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and conducted by NAEYC, explores how early childhood education programs engage immigrant families in their children's learning, how programs learn about these families and incorporate their cultures into the classrooms, and what programs are doing in terms of their staff's professional development related to working with immigrant children and families.

Our research

We used a qualitative, case study method that included interviews with teachers, program staff, and parents as well as observations in early childhood education programs in the United States and in Eastern Europe. Vesely (the first author) conducted analyses with respect to how high-quality programs are working with immigrant families. In the United States the baseline for quality was accreditation by NAEYC, while for the European programs, quality was determined by various early childhood education experts in each of the Eastern European countries visited. In the United States we studied four early childhood education programs comprised primarily of immigrant children and families from Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. In Europe, Ginsberg (the second author) visited a number

of high-quality, exemplary programs serving Roma settlements in Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia.

We selected programs serving Roma in various Eastern European countries because of these programs' resourcefulness in working with a marginalized population. Programs used cultural brokers—individuals who understand the Roma culture—to help develop trust between these families and the programs and engaged parents by providing information regarding access to various social services during daily and weekly parent groups. We believe that the resourcefulness among early childhood programs working with Roma families provides useful insight for programs working with undocumented immigrant groups in other parts of the world, as these families have similar experiences in interacting with various social institutions and systems. Visiting and understanding Roma early childhood programs provided insight into ways programs in other countries can better serve immigrant families.

Qualitative analyses of the interview transcripts and field observation notes identify four principles or themes as particularly important for early childhood programs working with immigrant families: improving program access and quality; building staff relationships with families; supporting parents' community participation and negotiation of community resources; and improving staff development, dynamics, and well-being.

It is important to note that when programs implement recruitment efforts, they need to be ready to enroll families immediately.

Improving access to and quality of early childhood education programs for immigrant families

The programs in this study were concerned with improving access for all immigrant families to their programs and creating high-quality education environments for the children enrolled in their centers.

Increased access and outreach

Some programs, in both the United States and Eastern Europe, made conscious efforts to increase access and reach out to immigrant families in their programs. These efforts included program staff going door-to-door in local neighborhoods to contact immigrant families as well as creating programs specifically for parents whose children did not attend formal early childhood programs. These programs wanted to be sure they were reaching and providing information to all of the immigrant families in their communities.

For example, one program started a parents' group that met in a local park. While spending time in the community and recruiting parents and children for the center-based program, staff members met parents who did not want to enroll their children in a center just yet, but who expressed interest in learning more about child development and effective ways of interacting with their children. Program staff organized a play group for parents and children. The group met in the park, a space in the local community where parents were at ease, and program staff led discussions about child development and parenting topics of interest to participants.

The study results suggest that early childhood education programs in neighborhoods with high numbers of immigrants should focus on outreach in the community through play groups, door-to-door recruitment campaigns, and talking with immigrant families enrolled in the program about referring friends who need high-quality early childhood education. However, it is important to note that when programs implement recruitment efforts, they need to be ready to enroll families immediately. If long waiting lists develop, families may

be frustrated and choose not to enroll their children.

Professional development to improve quality

Administrators described their efforts to increase program quality by offering professional development opportunities focusing on understanding and working with diverse families, stress management for teachers and staff, and encouraging teachers and assistant teachers to attain education beyond certificates and associate degrees. Through onsite training and training in the community, teachers and staff learned more about social services available to immigrant families as well as how to make sure that families who needed services were not denied. After the trainings, family service workers, teachers, and other staff members conveyed their new information to families.

Additionally, programs created learning communities in which teachers and staff regularly discuss and learn about developmentally appropriate practice. In the future, programs may extend the learning communities to include early childhood workers who are not center staff or teachers, but who provide care for young, immigrant children in the neighborhood.

Building relationships with immigrant parents and families

One of the most significant findings was that early childhood education programs emphasize the use of culturally competent practices to build relationships with immigrant families in their programs. For the programs in the study, the process of building strong, trusting relationships between programs and families included multiple strategies. Some are typical of any high-quality



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early childhood education program, and some strategies are unique to programs working with immigrant families, such as understanding families' cultural backgrounds and incorporating families' languages and cultures into the classrooms and the overall program.

Teachers' daily or weekly interactions with immigrant parents in the program setting and regular home visits were extremely important in learning about families' experiences and cultures. They helped build and sustain strong, trusting relationships with families. Teachers and other staff members visited with parents, the children, and the extended family in their homes. Teachers' initial visits focused on parents' goals for their children and learning about the individual children; later visits by teachers or other staff members focused on parents' goals for the family in general. During these interactions, teachers and staff learned about families' cultures and experiences and developed comfortable and trusting relationships with them.

For example, one teacher described his home visit with a family from Ghana. He learned about their life in Ghana

and their experiences in coming to the United States. The family gave the teacher paintings from Ghana to hang in the classroom. Each time the parents and their son saw the paintings, they were reminded of their cultural origins as well as their acceptance in this new culture.

In addition to home visits, the programs and classrooms in this study successfully used a variety of techniques to reflect the languages and cultures of the families on a daily basis. Program staff assisted with translation of notices to parents, developed strategies for supporting multiple languages in the program and classrooms, and shaped the classroom environments and implemented curricula in ways that embraced the various cultures and languages. Materials for parents and labels for objects were translated into the dominant two or three home languages of families in the programs.

At a program with many families from the Middle East, North Africa, and Central and South America, for example, the teachers labeled items and areas in the classroom in English, Arabic, and Spanish. Displayed next to the Roman alphabet was the Arabic alphabet. Another program had access to a *language line*—a phone number staff could call to have materials instantly translated into nearly any language. Other programs had staff members from various cultures provide translation assistance. Teachers and staff in programs without access to

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translators used creative approaches to communicate with families who did not speak the dominant language of the host country. For example, one US teacher who did not speak Spanish but worked with many Spanish-speaking parents took numerous photographs of the children throughout the day and used the photos to inform parents about their children's daily experiences.

In many of the classrooms, maps or flags representing the families' countries of origin hung on the wall. Teachers incorporated pictures of families in traditional dress and artifacts from different cultures donated by parents. Many teachers also infused culture in a variety of subtle ways. They included clothing from various countries in the dramatic play area, provided instruments and music from other cultures in the music area, served food from various cultures for lunch each day, and used artifacts from other countries during regular daily activities. For example, one teacher had the children gather on a blanket from Chile for story time.

Supporting parents' identity development and representation in the community

The programs participating in this study were extremely committed to linking parents with social services and helping families advocate for their needs. Teachers and staff were conscious of the importance of working with families, guiding and encouraging parents to make changes on their own rather than "overfunctioning" for the family. One director consistently asked parents who needed assistance, "How are you going to work it out? How can we help you work it out?"

Formal structures like parent committees and home visits reflected parents' empowerment to support their own and their children's well-being. Such structures were well developed in each program in the United States and Eastern Europe. Teachers and administrators encouraged parents to join the parent policy council or other governing bod-

ies, and in most programs, designated staff supported parents in achieving their individual goals. In one program, a parent ultimately was asked to join the board of directors and navigated this leadership opportunity with staff support. He remarked to a staff member, "[I] never thought I could be part of something like [the board]." When he began, he felt "like a fish out of water," but now he feels much more comfortable and confident in his abilities.

In many ways the early childhood education programs in this study were service centers for immigrant parents, helping them navigate various social systems. All of the programs had staff who assisted parents in identifying their needs and helped them seek services related to employment, housing, and mental and physical health. Often parents felt more comfortable asking someone at the early childhood program for assistance than going to a local social welfare agency, where some had had negative experiences. One parent described a discouraging experience at

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the local social services agency, where she was told that “in America you have to work for what you want.” Feeling guilty and unwelcome, she then turned to the family service worker at her son’s early childhood education program to help her navigate and liaise with social service agencies in her community.

Staff development, dynamics, and well-being

Another finding from our research is the importance of focusing on staff development that centers specifically on working with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Also, our observations and interview data revealed the importance of considering the interactions among program staff from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as addressing staff emotional and physical well-being, and how these influence programs’ abilities to work with immigrant families.

Staff development

Our research found that the attention programs give to staff development is key in improving service to immigrant families. Knowing that parents may feel more comfortable speaking with individuals from their same cultural background or who understand their culture, programs in the United States and Europe intentionally increased staff diversity and cultural competence. The programs maintained diverse staff by “growing our own.” Programs recruited parents or others from the community, then provided the necessary scaffolding to train them to work first as volunteers, and ultimately—after completing appropriate training and education—to be hired as teachers. One program consistently offered training for parents to become substitute teachers. This enabled parents to explore their interest in teaching in an early childhood program with a low level of commitment. Often parents were substitute teachers while working on their Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. Once a parent received a CDA credential, if there were any job openings, the program offered him or her a teaching position. While teaching at the program, a parent could begin working

on a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education through partnerships with local universities and colleges interested in conducting research with early childhood education teachers and programs. Consequently, teachers and staff received credit for courses toward their associate and/or baccalaureate degrees, while local universities and colleges learned more about the use of various curricula in diverse early childhood education programs.

Some programs determined professional development activities by asking teachers and staff what areas and topics were of interest to them. Other programs used self-assessment tools to determine areas needing improvement. Trainings helped teachers effectively implement curricula with dual language learners; link families with local social services as needs arose; and learn about working and communicating with staff and teachers from diverse backgrounds. Some programs arranged for language classes for teachers who were immigrants, as well as language classes for native teachers so they could learn the languages of the children and families in the programs.

Staff dynamics

With teachers and staff members from varied backgrounds working together, the dynamics of relationships at each of these programs was notable. Teachers and staff, particularly those from different backgrounds, tended to rely on one

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another to learn about different cultures and languages and to ultimately help build relationships with parents and children. Administrators encouraged this interconnectedness by assigning teachers from different backgrounds to work together and by scheduling staff workshops focused on cultural competence and working with others from diverse backgrounds.

Teachers and staff described a variety of professional development activities that they believed would be particularly helpful to individuals working with immigrant parents and children. Individuals in these programs wanted to develop meaningful ways of incorporating culture into the classroom. As one director stated,

... we did things [referring to a recent training] like breaking down the different centers and what can you do in each center to make your classroom more culturally diverse. It needs to be more than just having dolls for different races, which is what people think of... If you do your bulletin board and you have a parent bring you a piece of material from their home country and you make that the background to your bulletin board, or [if during] nap time you’re playing... Indian music for all the children to nap to, just adding those things in [helps to incorporate different cultures].

Staff well-being

A final area that emerged in this study that needs to be explored in greater depth, particularly in early childhood education programs serving immigrant families, is staff and teacher health and well-being. On multiple occasions during classroom observations or interviews, teachers or staff members were ill. In a few cases, staff members who were not working directly with children were very ill (usually with head colds and chest coughs), yet they continued to come to work. Among teachers, physical illness was less apparent; more often we observed pure exhaustion due to taxing personal and professional schedules.

During the interviews and observations, the demanding nature of teachers’ schedules became clear. One teacher’s day began and ended with a commute of an hour and a half in traffic; during the day she received an hour-long lunch break, but it was often shortened so she



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could complete tasks in the classroom. On such days she would either eat lunch in the classroom or just sit in her car to eat and have a few moments away from the classroom. During one observation, this teacher ate both breakfast and lunch in her car.

Many of the teachers and staff members seemed emotionally exhausted, suffering burnout from continually trying to help the children and families in their program. Among early childhood education professionals, burnout is becoming more commonplace and may be an even greater risk for staff of early education programs serving high percentages of immigrant families with diverse needs. Trying to meet these needs leads to greater professional satisfaction but may also be associated with greater physical and emotional stress.

Early childhood education programs need to regularly consider the mental and physical health of employees and provide necessary support. Programs can increase the number and/or length of break times away from children throughout the day, provide more accommodating sick leave policies, and offer mental health support for teachers and staff who work with families facing very tough circumstances.

Conclusion

The programs participating in this study represent the upper echelon of early education programs in the United

States and Eastern Europe, some with greater resources than many other early education programs. However, their experiences provide insight into a variety of ways practitioners and researchers can work more effectively with young immigrant children and their families. More applied research, as well as discussions among early childhood education practitioners who work with immigrant families, is needed to continue to increase our understanding of successfully meeting the needs immigrant families with young children around the world.

To receive a copy of the complete report on this research, contact Colleen Vesely at cvesely@naeyc.org.

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