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Development

Immigration and Acculturation, Child Care and Schooling

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Introduction

Immigrants are often confronted with difficult decisions regarding how to provide care and education for their offspring in their country of destination. Involvement with child care and with school can sometimes help in the process of acculturation for both parent and child. A child care provider or teacher can become a conduit to the ways of the new country; and they can help forge connections to potentially helpful social organizations and networks. However, advantages that might accrue to this new relationship can come at the expense of maintaining family style or values prevalent in the culture of origin. As a consequence of this back-and-forth struggle, immigrant children may not be launched on a pathway that leads to academic success, personal well-being, productive employment, and good citizenship.

Subject

With more women around the world entering the workforce, the use of non-parental care has increased in most countries.[1,2] Arranging suitable child care can be critical for families recently

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arrived in a new country as it enables them to find and maintain employment in communities where new immigrants are typically in the minority and may have limited opportunities to obtain desirable jobs.[3] In such circumstances, children's academic success is also a high priority, as it enables children (and sometimes other members of their families) to connect to the society of destination and to obtain the resources necessary for long-term well-being.

Problems

Finding child care options that fit family needs and parenting beliefs about what is good for children can be challenging for immigrants.[4] The care of young children by someone other than the parent remains non-normative in many societies. Extended kith and kin networks are more commonly used if parents need help caring for their children. What it means to leave one's child in the care of non-family members (or others well-known to the parent) is hard for many newly immigrated parents to fathom. The options for child care may not be well understood and parental expectations regarding what caregivers do with children may well not match what is likely to happen.[5] Immigrant families are also more likely to live in what are now called child care "deserts" and may not qualify for child care subsidies.[6,7]

The same is true of schools. Many immigrants arrive into countries where school options and policies are vastly different from those in the country of origin, as are the expectations and practices of school personnel. In many countries there is a patchwork of governmental policies which are confusing and hard to negotiate, beginning with preschool and continuing through higher education.[8,9,10] In most countries the transition to school is easier for some immigrant children and more difficult for others.[8,11,12] Part of this challenge derives from family economic circumstances and part from cultural variations as regards goals for children and their role in family life; and part derives from parental knowledge about school policies and practices in the country of immigration.[13,2] Despite efforts to encourage enrollment in preschool for immigrant children, immigrant populations vary in terms of utilizing free government-sponsored preschool opportunities.[10,14,15,16]

Research Context

Because children of immigrants represent a significant portion of the school population and because immigrants as a group tend to have higher birth rates than long-term citizens in many countries, there is considerable interest in research that addresses factors connected to the

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utilization of non-parental care and early education and to school engagement and academic success for immigrant children,[14,15,16] as well as their involvement once children enter school.[8,17] There is interest both in research that has policy implications (especially in a time of changing political and economic climates) and in research that has implications for practice (e.g., how to achieve a better fit between the needs and proclivities of immigrant children/families and the strategies used to engage them).[8,9,11] Studies of early education represent a kind of bridge between these two bodies of research in that studies of early education often address basic caregiving and educational issues as well as child and family issues in the sense that for some immigrant children entry into child care constitutes the first transition into social institutions in the new country.[14,18] The framework for research on child care and schools has broadened over the last two decades, becoming both more biologically and culturally informed.[19]

Key Research Questions

Numerous questions remain to be addressed for both child care and schools as regards immigrant families. They include:

- What policies should local, state and federal governments implement so as to increase access to affordable, high quality non-parental care for immigrant families, both prior to and after children enter school?
- How can child care providers more fully and successfully engage immigrant parents so that child and family needs are met?
- Are there ways in mixed group (immigrant plus non-immigrant) child care and education settings to adjust practice so that the needs of all children are well met?
- During the primary grades, what practices (e.g., monolingual versus dual language) best promote long-term school engagement and academic success?
- How might school personnel better engage immigrant parents to promote immigrant children’s interest in school and achievement?
- Throughout the school years, what socialization practices and attributes of school climate promote a sense of well-being and dedication to school and community engagement for immigrant children?
- To what extent should interventions broaden their focus beyond target settings (e.g., child care providers, schools, family, housing) to address community conditions and receptivity

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so as to achieve goals in behalf of immigrant children?

Recent Research Results

- Family values, preferences (including the nationality of the care providers) and level of acculturation help determine child care choices for immigrant families.[3,14]
- Immigrant families tend to make less use of non-parental care than natives, even accounting for other demographics;[17] and when they do, family, friend and neighbour care (informal care done in someone's home) is the most prevalent form of non-parental care.[20,21,22] This is especially true when children are infants and toddlers and especially when families are poor or language minority and parents have limited English Proficiency.[14,20,21,23,24]
- Although there is some evidence that early education benefits immigrant children from low-income families,[14,25] the evidence is less compelling for more recent immigrants and those who enter programs without English proficiency.[26,27]
- Part of failure of schools to fully promote academic success may derive from misunderstandings on the part of school personnel as to the goals of immigrant families and the behaviour of their children.[28] There is evidence that this misconnect may contribute to long-term distress in immigrant children.[8,29] There is also evidence that discrimination may reduce immigrant children's engagement.[30]
- Neighbourhood factors play a role in immigrant children's school success, but it is not always easy to isolate neighbourhood from school composition factors when trying to understand academic success.[31,32]
- Ability to form social connections seems to play a role in how well families use the child care resources of the community and engage the schools.[24,33,34]
- Efforts have been made to characterize family, community, and school environments that contribute to academic success and positive adaptation.[31,32,35,36,37,38,39]

Research Gaps

- There remains insufficient attention to the full array of ecological factors implicated in academic success and community engagement on the part of immigrant parents and children, including community conditions and patterns of receptivity.[40] This is paired with lack of tightness in sampling designs and measurement strategies.[41]

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- There are few longitudinal investigations of community based and school interventions, ones that can provide good estimates of impact as they relate to various academic, health, and life choice outcomes.[42]
- There remains insufficient attention to most immigrant groups and to differences in nativity, and levels of acculturation and bicultural competence.[3]
- Too few studies are structured so that they have clear policy or programmatic implications.[8,9]
- There remains scant attention to how child care and school environments can promote the set of competencies children need to facilitate "self productivity."[43]

Conclusions

Children of immigrants represent a large and growing share of the population in many countries. Studies document the strains produced in the process of immigration and acculturation, strains at child and family levels, strains at community and governmental levels, and strains at the level of institutions such as child care and school. There is evidence of success at all levels as regards the process of adaptation; but there is also evidence of uncertainty and failure. As is often the case with complex processes of adaptation, research lags real-world change. Research does not yet offer either precise or complete explanations for most of the things observed – indeed, many are not even adequately described. Neither does research offer the kind of detailed information needed to inform policy or practice. Thus, decisions to be made by parents, providers, advocates, and politicians await findings from a new generation of research that is guided by better integrated theories of human behaviour and child development.

Implications

Given the current state of knowledge, current conditions that face immigrant children and families, and current socio-political circumstances, the research community (including those who fund research) would do well to simultaneously step back and move forward. Specifically, researchers need to pull back in the sense of moving away from the frameworks that originally guided their research. Too often the initial forays into research betray limited understanding of the issues involved and a narrow ideology as regards what's important and how to address a set of problems. There is need to move forward with respect to using more inclusive frameworks that attempt to integrate ideas, variables, and theories that address child, family, community, and institutional processes and to conduct studies that have a longer time scope. In that regard

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the research community (including funders) would do well to consider two things:

- practicality – can the findings be turned into useful policies and practices in a reasonably straightforward way, and
- synergy or leveraging – sets of variables or processes that have functional connections that drive children's development or provider practices in more than small additive ways over short time intervals.

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