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Are we on the right path to honoring diversity in early education? Lessons learned from Canada

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What are unique challenges of global migration on Latin American families in Canada?
Latin American immigrants in Canada are not flourishing in comparison to other groups. One can see this by looking at a number of indicators including, low high school and university graduation rates, low representation at advanced level classes, high drop our rates. At the group level, Latin American face high unemployment, poor housing, and relative poverty. One of the barriers which immigrant parents may encounter in the process of acculturation into their new country is differing expectations about how children should behave in school. Major conflicts may arise from differences relating to the whole range of child rearing and care issues, with particular emphasis on the ways of handling misbehaviors of children.

What are common misconceptions regarding this group?
Attempts to characterize misconceptions, or propose proper ones run into the problem that immigrants from Latin America make up a diverse cultural group. They differ in factors such as national origin and history, the particular social formation within each country that shapes age, gender and class relationships, and the pressures within each country that have led to emigration. Despite these differences, studies of families from Latin America, illustrate that they typically adhere to a number of values that might be called traditional, in particular the role of authority figures and the concept of collective family good and honor. The family is accepted as a main factor in character building and Latin American parents believe that schools should be an extension of the family in that respect. Given these qualifications, I proceed.

According to teachers we have interviewed, Latin American parents were not involved, did not come to meetings and could not be mobilized to participate in their children's schooling. In short they were seen as having neither the interest nor the motivation to help, in most cases. In some cases the motivation was admitted, but parents were held to lack the skills needed to help. This was often given as the explanation for the children's poor school performance. We have found substantial efforts made by most parents to be involved and where efforts have diminished, it is arguably because of the parents' beliefs that effort was futile.

A story of a family who has experienced the effects of global migration.
When Monica was two years old, her family emigrated from Nicaragua. Neither parent speaks English; their factory jobs require only its marginal use. The family prizes its Nicaraguan heritage, which they view as their primary culture and pride themselves on having brought up an obedient and respectful child who speaks good Spanish. Monica's family plans to return to their native country soon so she will grow up having respect for her family. Her mother explains:

> For me [knowing how to speak Spanish] is important ... at home she always remembers, we too, we always speak it, we always remind her that it is beautiful there too ... we always remind her so when we will go back, she will know. [In this country] the children, one loses them, there is no love and tenderness toward the parents … I don't want this to happen to my daughter. That's why we decided we are going back to Nicaragua as soon as she turns 10.

Monica is 8 years old and in grade three. In the last year, it has become evident that she has difficulty in school. The main concern the parents have is the lack of match between Monica's efforts at school and her marks.

> I would like to know how... what it is that Monica needs? Why in the report cards the teacher says she needs more math, more reading and at home, although we don't speak much English, we are always helping her in everything. She always does her homework and knows everything we ask her, but the report card always arrives as if she is failing.

The teacher shares the puzzlement over her performance. He agrees that in spite of putting tremendous effort into her school work, she is not doing well.

> Monica is having difficulties... academically...she's reading a year below grade level... she's a dedicated worker, tries really hard but has just had a bit of difficulty learning the process of reading, learning to recognize words. My sense of the family is that they are very supportive ... they work with her on a regular basis and they have reward systems so she's always keen to do her spelling... She [Monica] has difficulty with vowels in English as opposed to vowels in Spanish, and so being able to learn both the sounds in English and Spanish and to sound out words is difficult. And I think her home is almost entirely Spanish spoken... I'm not sure directly what sort of impact that has but I think that may well make it more difficult for her to be picking up reading English.

In spite of strong motivation and parents who take time each day to support her with her school work, it appears that, without intervention, Monica is not headed for academic success. She will likely lack high-school level proficiency in any language, will continue to underachieve, and she and her parents will become increasingly marginalized. Monica has already lowered her expectations for herself. Does Monica herself actually have a deficiency? We do not dispute that her performance rate does not look as good as that of her classmates according to the standards enforced. But we would argue that she is enrolled in an educational system where children are categorised according to their performance on arbitrary tasks (e.g., labelled gifted, adequate, or deficient).

Monica's cooperativeness and non-assertiveness have a cultural basis yet the overlap of gender and class factors must also be considered.

> Monica is too good. The parents have taught her that she has to obey the teacher, that she has to behave well in class, not to interrupt. In this [Canadian] system if the children are not aggressive they stay behind. Many times she [Monica] misses an opportunity because she is too slow compared to the others. She has great interest and tremendous motivation.

It is important not to take Monica's lack of promoting herself simply as an inborn trait but to look at the context in which it emerges and how it could be dealt with to her advantage. The parents' efforts to train her in obedience are part of their overall commitment to maintaining her cultural identity. We have seen how Monica and her family are struggling against the dominant discourse on child development. When problems of motivation do appear, they will be the results, not basic causes, of the difficulties in the educational system.

Applying what we know of child development and family dynamics, what are the likely effects of these family experiences on the young child?

Parents' experiences often have the effect of making them powerless, or even more relevant, appear powerless to the children. Hence the parents may be unable to wield authority, for instance. The effect of this, is that the child will lack discipline, and perhaps look to peers, as in a gang activity. Indeed the child may develop a more pervasive distrust or dislike of authority, which bodes ill for school and vocational success.

In many areas, especially school related, the parents' capital and that of the community is rendered irrelevant. Children's educational outcomes are affected when cultural capital does not match the demands of the school. In a broader sense, the children develop without certain key inputs with respect to values and resources. This may tend to make them feel 'rootless' or alienated; or perhaps lead them to 100% accept the majority culture and reject their own. Lacking strong extra-familial figures-- appropriate ones, not just pop stars-- the child has no good model of a successful adult who is well embedded in his or her family and culture.

How can we support child and family (and staff) development?

There is a need to develop open, two-way channels of communication between professionals in education and immigrant families. In this way, professionals will become familiar with the world view and culture of the immigrants and the possible barriers which they may encounter and, on also, parents will have a chance to become familiar with the orientations in school as well as to have an opportunity to express disagreements and ask questions.

Family resources need to be identified, appreciated and drawn upon. For example, the ways in which children are being reared and disciplined, including in schools, need to be appreciated in their diversity of goals, including the standards of “appropriateness” articulated by western professionals. Professionals in educational systems should learn what the role and approaches of educational staff were in the immigrants' country of origin.

Professionals need to develop an understanding about barriers to adaptation immigrants face and the impact these have on children. By considering clashes between their way of reacting to children and the cultural background of the immigrants, professionals could address concerns that immigrant parents may have but are unable to express (e.g., the expectation of immigrants from Latin America for a more caring and supportive approach towards their children). This knowledge could also contribute to culturally competent assessments of immigrant children, as well as to the development of culturally competent ways of handling their behaviors. Based on such knowledge, professionals may question whether or not the ways in which they respond to misbehaviors of children fits every child regardless of the cultural context of the child.

There is also a need to provide parents a place to explore misunderstandings and express disagreements that they and their children may experience. In addition to helping immigrant parents be understood by the educational staff, they should be helped to learn about the role and approach of the teachers in the new countries to various situations, including misbehaviors of children, as another step in their acculturation. Thus efforts to increase immigrant parents' familiarity with the way in which disciplinary actions are being handled could be a productive approach towards reducing conflicts.

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