



Bridging Differences with Understanding: Helping Immigrant Children Be More Ready to Learn

By Judith Colbert, PhD

When you greet the children in your child care setting on any given day, you likely welcome into your group children who speak different languages and are accustomed to different cultural and social practices. What all of these children do share are two things: The time they spend together with you, and their need to become ready for the school setting.

Children in immigrant families are the fastest growing segment of the child population of the United States. In 2000, one in five children lived in immigrant families where at least one parent was foreign born (Matthews & Ewen, 2006). You are an important person in their lives. Your ability to understand and address their individual needs will help determine whether they have the knowledge and skills to succeed in school.

This trend toward increasing diversity was not unexpected, nor is the field unprepared. In 1994, participants in a workshop organized by the National Academy of Science concluded that "sound educational practices for young children in general" seem "well-suited to instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse groups," because they include "opportunities for tailoring classroom practices to children's individual styles and approaches to learning" (Phillips & Crowell, 1994).

Although much has changed since 1994, the recommendation that practice be tailored to the individual child has not. Increasing diversity, however, means that teachers and caregivers have had to become more careful observers of individual children and more critical interpreters of "sound educational practices." As a result, in addition to asking, "What does this practice mean in relation to what I know or the customs and values of my own social group?" you must also ask:

"How does this practice relate to the lives of parents and children from cultures?"

"Will they see it as I do?"

"Given their varied backgrounds and experience, how can I apply what I know to help immigrant children achieve positive outcomes?"

Differing Views of Readiness

For young children, one of the most obvious ways to think about positive outcomes is in terms of readiness for school. What is readiness? Is it located within the child or in the network of influences surrounding the child? With respect to the child, researchers in the United States and elsewhere appear to be looking for readiness in approximately the same broad areas. In the United States the National Educational Goals Panel (NEGP, 1995) identified five categories of readiness:

1. Physical well-being and motor development.
2. Social and emotional development.
3. Approaches to learning – dispositions to use skills.
4. Language development – verbal language and emerging literacy.
5. Cognition and general knowledge.

Researchers have further reduced skills in these areas to two broad categories: Social and academic. They have shown that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children working in a second language receive lower scores on assessments in all areas, while teachers and parents from all backgrounds offer differing views of readiness.

In a recent study of a Canadian school readiness program for diverse families with preschoolers, Pelletier & Corter (2005) tracked the children's progress in kindergarten and found that all English as a second language (ESL) children had significantly lower scores on assessments in readiness areas than non-ESL children. Further, ESL children with no readiness experience of any kind had lower scores than other groups and were judged least ready for school.

They also identified specific goals for both teachers and parents. When the study began, teachers emphasized direct curriculum interventions with children, but as the study progressed, they shifted their focus toward teaching and modeling for parents so that, in turn, parents could help their children understand the curriculum. Mainstream and ESL parents had a mixture of academic and social goals. While all parents reported goals defined as "socialization for the child" and "language and literacy," ESL parents had more academic goals, and non-ESL parents reported more social goals.

Meanwhile, the Australian Starting School Research Project, Dockett & Perry (2001) identified eight categories of transition to school issues: Knowledge, Social Adjustment, Skills, Dispositions, Rules, Physical, Family Issues, and Education Environment. They asked a cross-section of English-speaking children, parents and early childhood educators to rank the categories in order of importance. Although each response group ranked them differently, both parents and early childhood educators put Social Adjustment at the top and Knowledge at the bottom (parents) or near the bottom (educators) of their lists.

In a later study (Dockett & Perry, 2005), CALD parents were asked to rank the categories in relation to two criteria: How they could help their children, and what they thought their children needed to know to make the transition to school. Parents had many of the same concerns, but there were differences in the relative importance of the issues among the cultural groups, pointing to the need to focus on individual children and families and provide them with different information and supports. For example, Samoan parents raised Physical issues more often than other groups, while Chinese-speaking parents mentioned they thought their children needed more Knowledge compared to other groups. More than others, the Chinese and Arabic-speaking parents highlighted the importance of being able to manage food and toileting, while Samoan parents were most concerned with Social Adjustment. As in the Canadian study, the Knowledge category received a higher ranking from CALD parents than from English speaking parents.

What You Can Do

When you welcome newcomer children and interact with their parents, consider their views on readiness and place the children's transitions – to your setting and later to school – within the wider context of their social and cultural backgrounds, including the many other transitions newcomer families experience. Look with new eyes, both at your current educational practices and goals, and at the individual children in your group. Consider, in particular, two categories from the Australian project: Social Adjustment and Knowledge.

Social Adjustment

Social Adjustment is defined as "Knowing how to interact with a large group of children, or responding appropriately to the teacher" (Dockett & Perry, 2005). How do these skills challenge newcomer children? First, newcomers may be shy and wary of strangers. They may find it difficult to express feelings or be accustomed to showing their feelings differently. They may have been taught to respect their teacher and other adults by lowering their eyes and their voice. They may have been discouraged from stating their opinion. These behaviors may be misunderstood in a culture that values eye contact and encourages direct communication, including the sharing of thoughts and feelings with others.

How Can You Help?

- Allow children time and space to adjust. Reduce stimulation, permit quiet time and let children watch the program in action.
- Introduce interactions gradually. Start with child/teacher interactions, model social behavior, and, in time, set up learning situations with other children.
- Avoid asking children directly how they feel. Instead, watch for behavior that might signal strong feelings, such as either withdrawal or excessive activity.
- Avoid asking children to express opinions or answer questions in front of others until you are sure they are comfortable, and do not misunderstand when they do not respond or "speak up."

When interacting with groups, newcomer children may find that their values are different. Children from cultures where collective achievement is valued over individual accomplishment may find it difficult to “win” at competitive games and may be uncomfortable when they receive individual praise for their work. Open-ended, child-directed activities may be difficult for them. They may be accustomed to following instructions or they may not know how to participate or carry out routines. Free choice may also be difficult. Children who have experienced scarcity may be overwhelmed by a rich variety of items. Toys may be unfamiliar, especially to children who only have experience with “toys” made at home from “found” objects and for whom games primarily involve interactions with others.

How Can You Help?

- Include group activities that do not emphasize competitiveness.
- When supporting children, acknowledge their contributions to the group and help children learn to value their own accomplishments.
- Provide direction when introducing activities and make sure children understand how to participate.
- Do not allow other children to tease newcomers because of the way they carry out routines, such as eating – they may use utensils differently or they may be fed at home and do not know how to eat on their own.
- Limit choice and introduce toys gradually, making sure children know how to play with them.
- Watch for signs of discomfort while children are participating in activities.

Knowledge

Knowledge, considered to be “Ideas, facts or concepts that need to be known in order to start school, such as knowing numbers and letters, name and telephone number” (Dockett & Perry, 2005), may also challenge newcomers. Some newcomers may be in a completely strange environment. Children from refugee camps, for example, will have no experience in a typical community, with houses, stores, schools and other buildings and their contents. Most newcomers will be challenged to learn a new language, although some may be just learning to talk. All will be coping with exposure to at least two languages simultaneously. Some, who already have basic language skills, may need to master a new alphabet and new conventions of reading and writing – from, left to right instead of right to left.

- **How Can You Help?**
Identify and label key items. Repeat the names of familiar objects and, wherever possible, introduce real items into the program.
- Interact with the children and stimulate communication.
- Support communication with pictures, music and non-verbal strategies.
- Provide books and paper and make sure children know how to use them.
- Build on what children already know and do not forbid use of their home language which is the foundation of their later language learning.

Bridging Differences with Understanding

While it is impossible, and not even desirable, to ensure that a child’s experiences at home and in your early childhood setting are exactly the same, it is possible to ensure some continuity between the two settings. For example, although you may not be able to provide care and instruction in a child’s home language, you can respect that language by learning a few words – to comfort the child when necessary – and being patient with the child’s need to function in two or more languages. You can help children be proud of their heritage and build self-esteem. Allowing families to feel connected and giving them a sense of belonging make important contributions to how well they adjust (Dockett & Perry, 2005).

Conclusion

In summary, you have a rich opportunity to give newcomers a positive start. You are in a unique position to help young immigrant children make successful transitions and be more ready to learn.

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Judith Colbert, PhD, is a consultant who specializes in early care and education who is currently developing best practices for the care of young immigrant and refugee children.

There is much that you can do to help children feel more comfortable and acquire the skills that will prepare them for school. Tailoring your program to meet the needs of newcomers does not necessarily require additional resources but does involve knowing and understanding each child. The best source of information about the children in your care is their parents. As we have seen above, parents' views of their children's needs may differ from yours, and newcomer parents may not share the same priorities and concerns. When your group includes newcomers, it is especially important to interact with parents, find out what happens at home and take steps to bridge differences.



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