

# Stages of immigrant parent involvement – survivors to leaders

Meeting immigrant parents on their own terms is the optimal way to foster parent engagement and thus student achievement.

**By Young-chan Han and Jennifer Love**



*Knowing how to use scissors is an imperative skill for students entering kindergarten. This student and her dad are working at a literacy station to create an alphabet book with bilingual picture representations.*

In a diverse school district, family liaisons help immigrant parents understand and apply for free and reduced-price meals served at the school. At another school, an interpreter at a school orientation event helps immigrants learn about school bus transportation — neither the parents nor their children have ever seen or taken a school bus in their home country. In another school neighborhood, bilingual parents receive training on school and district policies and procedures so they can provide insights for the school and share the information with others in their cultural community. At an elementary school where the majority of students are from Latino homes, immigrant parents serve as PTA leaders, running their meetings in Spanish and providing interpreters for English-speaking parents.

Immigrant families are not all alike nor are their needs or interests. These families come to the U.S. from

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diverse backgrounds with a wide range of needs and prior educational experiences. One parent may not be literate in his/her native language, while another parent may have several years of formal education. Some immigrant parents may have acquired educational levels equivalent to a Ph.D. in their country.

Language proficiency also varies. Some may not speak English; others may come from countries such as Nigeria, where English is the national language. An immigrant who works in a specialized field, such as science or technology, may be fluent in English but have a spouse with little knowledge of English or U.S. culture.

These cultural and linguistic differences pose challenges to schools that want to engage parents in their children's education. To support immigrant families in acclimating to a new school community and to help them become valued partners with the school, educators first must understand who these families are, their needs, and how schools can bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps between homes and schools.

To gain insights about parent involvement, many educators have turned to general parent involvement models that describe different ways parents interact with school. But these models do not adequately describe the unique factors affecting immigrant parents. A new model based on the experiences of U.S. immigrants from all over the world provides educators and community leaders with insights that help them tailor programs and services to support these families as they acclimate into U.S. school culture.

This model — called the Stages of Immigrant Parent Involvement — illustrates that parents' needs, skills, and interests evolve as he or she moves through the stages of Cultural Survivor, Cultural Learner, Cultural Connector, and Cultural Leader (Han, 2012). Understanding these stages better equips educators to identify where families are as well as their unique challenges and helps schools determine how to best support them.

*Cultural Survivors* face multiple challenges, and their priority is meeting their family's basic needs. Parents in this stage may be recently arrived immigrants or refugees escaping political unrest or seeking religious freedom. They might be illiterate in their native language and need to work multiple jobs in order to maintain the basic needs of food and shelter. With their long hours of work, cultural survivors tend to have very little time, if any, to learn about the U.S. school system and how to navigate it.

*Cultural Learners* are more comfortable with the new school culture and the U.S. education system. They are engaged in learning about the schools — instruction, curriculum, assessment, school culture, and more. With the help of qualified and trained interpreters and translated documents, parents communicate with schools and learn to navigate the U.S. school system. They feel more comfortable attending workshops in their native language and are likely to participate in parent-teacher conferences with language support.

*Cultural Connectors* develop greater familiarity with the school system, educational terminology and policies and procedures. They share information with cultural survivors and cultural learners about programs and activities that support children and parents. Cultural connectors are able to encourage and empower Cultural Survivors and Cultural Learners to become involved in their children's education.

*Cultural Leaders* are the face and the most resounding voice of their ethnic/language community. Parents in this stage are advocates for Cultural Survivors, Learners, and Connectors. They are able to communicate the needs of immigrant families to schools and community leaders. Participation in leadership programs and trainings support their ability to sharpen their leadership skills and to learn about the roles of parent leaders in schools and districts. Cultural Leaders speak up for immigrant students and families' needs as a voice for voiceless families.

#### **Time does not determine stages**

The amount of time an immigrant has been in the U.S. does not determine that person's stage of involvement, and parents do not necessarily move from

one stage to another. The story of co-author Youngchan Han's mother, Imhee Rah, illustrates this.

Mrs. Rah was a single mom who worked 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week for over 10 years when her family migrated to the U.S. from South Korea. She is a Cultural Survivor. Her involvement in her children's education was limited to ensuring that they had food to eat, a place to sleep, and that they attended school regularly. When the family immigrated to the U.S., Mrs. Rah registered Youngchan as a 6th-grade student. The next time she came to school was for high school graduation. Mrs. Rah never attended school events, not even a parent-teacher conference. She signed many school-related forms, but never knew what they were, nor questioned what she was signing. Even after all four of her beloved children graduated from public schools, Mrs. Rah remained a Cultural Survivor.

It is often the case that children learn to speak and read English, but parents do not have an opportunity to learn the language because of life's circumstances. Cultural Survivors rely heavily on other immigrant parents — cultural connectors and cultural leaders — for support and information. For Mrs. Rah — who spent 20 years as a short-order cook — and for many others who live a similar, hard-working life with little or no opportunity to learn English, years of residency in the U.S. do not determine their movement through stages of parent involvement.

### **Match services and practices with stages**

To develop effective practices and services that help immigrant parents acculturate into the dynamic U.S. education system, educators first must understand immigrant parents' needs based on the four stages of immigrant parent involvement. With that knowledge, schools and districts can develop programs and services not only to meet the basic needs of immigrant parents but also to equip and empower parents to become leaders in their school community.

Some school districts have effectively been using the Stages of Immigrant Parent involvement to develop targeted programming. Prince George's County is the second largest school system in Maryland and has an immigrant population that exceeds 35% of its total student population. Prince George's County's English language learner (ELL) office engages in several practices that support family learning, empowerment, and engagement in the educational journey.

### **Supporting Cultural Survivors and Cultural Learners through KinderConnect**

Making the home-school connection, coupled with guiding parents toward a partnership in the learn-

## *Coming to America*

### **Youngchan Han**



*The author is on the far left; her mother Imhee Rah on the far right.*

Growing up as a child of an immigrant and as an immigrant myself, I had to grow up fast to survive. I came to this country from South Korea when I was 13, attended school, learned English, and acclimated to American culture while my mother, a non-English speaker, worked over 10 hours a day, six days a week. My mother never had the opportunity to learn English. She was a hard-working single mom who provided basic needs for our family of five. In the absence of an adult at home, my responsibilities as a teenager rivaled those of an adult. I signed school papers, paid the bills, made dinner for my younger brother, cleaned the apartment, interpreted for my mother, translated documents, and worked part-time while attending school.

In Asian culture, the older generation cares and provides for the younger generation. As an immigrant, the roles reversed. When my mother wanted to buy a car, I had to interpret, help her understand the finances, and willingly put up my entire summer savings for a down payment. When she needed a surgery, I made the doctor's appointment, interpreted at the office, and stayed with her during the surgery.

Our roles reversed. I grew up fast so we could survive.

**Immigrant families are not all alike nor are their needs or interests.**



*A hayride is one of the activities that helps participating families better understand the value of allowing their children to join a camping experience at the 450-acre William S. Schmidt Outdoor Education Center.*

ing process, begins early. As reflected in Mrs. Rah's experiences as a Cultural Survivor, parents are often steeped in cultural expectations in which the family understands engagement as providing basic needs for the children. In a targeted effort to empower parents so that teaching and learning may occur at home, the KinderConnect workshops harness the opportunity to engage Cultural Survivors and Cultural Learners to make them aware of the skills needed for kindergarten readiness and to prepare students in the home. Specifically focusing on ELL students who haven't been in prekindergarten or Head Start, the children participate with their parents in the KinderConnect learning workshop, in which the family engages together in literacy and math activities. They work collaboratively on skill-building activities that are transferable to the home setting.

Learning station components are aligned to kindergarten readiness, and the activities are presented to support English language learning and are coupled with support for parents to enrich the teaching of their heritage language. Educators help and encourage families to replicate the preparatory activities at home. This program reaches over 600 students/families in the school district each year, solidifying an early commitment to supporting instruction at home.

### **Supporting Cultural Learners and Cultural Connectors with International Family Day**

How does a sleepover fit in with STEM? A sleepover is certainly an experience that many children in the United States have experienced. However, it is very much an anomaly for immigrant families who might not consider sending their child to sleep away from the home. So, while many schools were striving for full participation of 5th-grade students in Prince George's County's traditional Camp Schmidt overnight environmental learning experience, large percentages of immigrant families were not registering their children. Was the activity culturally irrelevant, rejected, or just beyond under-

standing? Likely, it was a combination of the three. What immigrant families needed was an opportunity to learn about the relevance of the overnight learning tradition that is part of the county's 5th-grade STEM curriculum.

Thus was borne International Family Day at Camp Schmidt, aimed at families of ELL students in 4th grade and below with the intention of bringing them to camp to acquaint and orient them and ultimately gaining their buy-in for their children to participate in the sleepover program. During the visit, families participate in team-building activities, meet the site leadership, hear from a panel of prior participants and their parents, learn more about the ecosystem and local river conservation efforts, as well as take a fun family hayride. This day of connecting families to the learning community has been a catalyst for student and parent engagement, increasing understanding and participation. A resounding number of families are now ready and sending their 5th graders for the overnight STEM adventure. Connecting context with cultural relevance for these Cultural Learners and Cultural Connectors' families was key to their engagement.

### **Supporting Cultural Connectors and Cultural Leaders through the International Parent Leadership Consortium**

Ania is a parent from Poland. She speaks fluent English, but she is unfamiliar with U.S. schools. *What is a school improvement team? What is a high school assessment?* Ania understands English, but these phrases still have no meaning to her, as there is no contextual basis for this educational jargon. She learns about the International Parent Leadership program in her school district and eagerly signs up and participates in the program for six weeks. She learns about mysterious acronyms, becomes familiar with the work of a school improvement team, PTA, and booster club, and learns about the role of the school board. She learns that American educators want to partner with parents to support student

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learning and growth. After six weeks of training, she is equipped and empowered to participate in leadership opportunities at her school and within the district. She was a Cultural Learner and has become a Cultural Leader.

There are far too few Cultural Leaders like Ania in our schools and communities and often parent leadership groups in schools don't reflect the diverse demographics of the school community. Many immigrant parents, though active leaders in their own ethnic/language community, often feel insecure about stepping up to be a leader in schools because they may not grasp or fully understand the intricacies of the U.S. school system. As a means to empower immigrant parent leaders and foster their confidence to be informed leaders and advocates within the school community, several school systems in Maryland have adopted a parent leadership model that focuses specifically on developing the leadership skills of cultural connectors and cultural leaders. Parents who participate in the International Parent Leadership Consortium in Prince George's County spend six three-hour sessions reflecting on leadership styles, learning about curriculum and assessment, individual and group advocacy, cultural communication, and a variety of other topics — all with the intent of supporting their development as knowledgeable and prepared leaders in their school communities.

### Equip, empower, and engage

Over 50 years of research has shown that when parents are involved, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, or socioeconomic status, children perform better in schools, stay in school longer, and go onto colleges and universities (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family engagement is a shared responsibility of schools, families, and communities for student achievement.

The stages of immigrant parent involvement become a critical point of reference as schools, school

districts, and organizations identify needs and align outreach efforts to support family engagement. The perspective and practice of engaging a Cultural Survivor differs greatly from engaging a Cultural Connector or Cultural Leader. It is imperative to understand that a one-size-fits-all outreach model or program does not meet the needs of all immigrant parents. But schools and districts can develop targeted outreach strategies, aligned with activities to meet the needs inherent in each stage of immigrant parent involvement. These should be coupled with appropriate resources for language access, as educators support families in moving from Cultural Survivors to Cultural Learners, Cultural Connectors, and even Cultural Leaders. As educators, we have a commitment to engaging all families and all learners regardless of race, ethnicity, language or socioeconomic status. **K**

### References

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*This future kindergarten student is counting and creating numbers using cubes at a mathematics station.*