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Document for School Personnel

ENHANCE YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEWCOMER PARENTS

Recent research at Ryerson University in Toronto has identified ways in which schools can better serve newcomer families. The insights gained from the research are relevant to teachers, administrators, and other school personnel who wish to develop stronger, more effective working relationships with parents who are newcomers to Canada.

The findings also have implications for ministries of education, school boards, and post-secondary institutions that prepare students for careers that involve working with children and their families.

The suggestions below are intended to help schools, school boards, and ministries of education build strong, respectful relationships with diverse families. Recognizing the many demands on educators' time, this pamphlet is intended to succinctly present practical solutions and research-based recommendations.

Enhanced relationships between educators and newcomer parents are a worthy objective. Newcomer parents have much to offer and their full integration into their children's schools will enrich school life for educators and pupils alike. Children whose families are newcomers to Canada will benefit from the involvement of their parents in their education. Educators will derive personal and professional satisfaction from working in partnership with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. All pupils stand to benefit when newcomer parents are involved in their children's schools and share their knowledge, skills, life experiences, and cultural practices. Newcomer parents are a valuable resource for the schools their children attend. With support from ministries of education, schools can develop stronger links with newcomer parents and thereby enrich the learning of all pupils.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENHANCING RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEWCOMERS

Learn More About the History, Geography, and Cultures of the World

The parents who participated in the Ryerson research project reported that the teachers and other professionals at their children's schools have limited knowledge of their cultures. When asked how much knowledge of their cultures the school personnel seem to have, none of the participants chose the option "a great deal." Over half chose "almost nothing" and 45% indicated the teachers and other professionals had "some knowledge" of their cultures.

It would be beneficial for educators and school administrators to have additional knowledge of the history and geography and cultures of the countries of origin of newcomer families. In the words of the parents:

...I realize that it is very difficult for the teachers to learn my culture and about all the other cultures that exist in this country, but ... they should make the effort because unfortunately there are stereotypes that should be addressed. (Montreal mother)

I believe it is very difficult for teachers to know everything, but they need a little knowledge of the culture of Latin America, Europe, Africa because it is true that we come from so many different cultures...Knowing more about each other's cultures allows for more understanding and support from teachers. (Montreal mother)

...educators need to have ...information about the different cultures that make up the society of Quebec... (Montreal mother)

Well I believe they (school personnel) must have training about immigrants (Montreal mother)

... I feel that ...teachers... need to know that children come from different though important parts of the world so they feel proud about themselves. ... the teachers as a rule should know about all the places because this is a multicultural country. (Vancouver mother)

They should learn to respect the cultural differences. (Statement generated by Toronto mothers)

A broad liberal arts education and ongoing reading and attention to global current events are desirable for careers in all branches of education. Knowledge of the traditions and cultures of newcomer families is a good foundation for relationship-building with parents.

The expectation is not expertise or detailed knowledge of all of the cultures represented in Canadian schools. It would be unrealistic to aim to have all newcomer parents report that all of the teachers and other professionals in their children's schools have "a great deal" of knowledge of their cultures. Over half of the parents in the Ryerson study reported that teachers know "almost nothing" about their cultures, so there is a lot of room for improvement. Individual schools and school districts could realistically work toward providing their personnel with basic knowledge of the history, geography, and cultures of the countries of origin of their newcomer families. In-service programs should be developed and offered to insure that educators and administrators have at least "some knowledge" of the cultures in their schools.

Pursuit of such a goal provides an opportunity for collaboration with newcomer parents. Many parents will respond positively to invitations to teach teachers and pupils about their countries of origin.

Recognize the Difficulties Experienced by all Newcomers

Parent-school relationships are enhanced when educators show they understand the hardships and challenges experienced by parents who are new to Canada. Over half of the parents in the research study reported that teachers show no empathy for the hardships they have experienced. The parents expressed it this way:

... we are immigrants... This means that we go through an adaptation process, that we have economic constraints. (Toronto mother)

... when you come here first and don't know the language, ... things become more problematic. ... we don't know what to do in a different system with different values and habits... (Montreal mother)

... when we come here we are so sad and lonely (Montreal mother)

... (school personnel) need to understand how the sudden change caused by immigration impacts the child -- not knowing the language, hearing people talking and not being able to understand anything. I believe the school staff must be prepared to understand this and also that we don't understand either and even if we want to speak with them we can't, especially they should speak (our home) language, if only few things -- welcoming words so the child doesn't feel in nobody's land. I think this is a very traumatic experience for both the child and the parent and it is important the teachers can help to overcome it. (Montreal mother)

It (is) important that they (school personnel) acknowledge that we are immigrants. They should know more about the process of immigration and the impacts on immigrant families. (Statements generated by Toronto mothers)

Canadian schools work with children from immigrant families, asylum-seeking families, and undocumented families. Educators are usually unaware of the immigration status of children's families. Some children and their parents have experienced considerable trauma prior to their arrival in Canada. They may be experiencing significant ongoing stress in addition to the difficulties experienced by all newcomers. There is considerable variability among newcomer families in terms of their emotional readiness to form relationships with their children's teachers. The immigration experience is difficult for all families. Educators need to be aware that terror and trauma and extreme hardship are part of the lives of some newcomers to Canada.

By showing empathy and sensitivity, school personnel can build the foundation for positive working relationships with newcomer parents. It is advisable to make allowances and be patient and supportive. Parents may be coping with very challenging circumstances, often including financial stresses, without adequate social support. Schools have the potential to be part of the support network for newcomer parents, helping them, and easing their adjustment to life in Canada.

Adapt Teaching Methods for Individual Students

A foundation principle, frequently cited by educators, is their commitment to developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). In the classroom, educators who endorse DAP strive to “adapt for and be responsive to inevitable individual variation” and apply their “knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for the participating children and their families. (NAEYC, 1997)”

In the Ryerson study, 69% of the parents reported that their children’s teachers make no adaptations to their practices to suit the unique needs of their children. Another 27% believe teachers make some minor adaptations. There is a wide gap between descriptions of good practice and the delivery of education to the children of newcomers. In the words of the participants:

(Teachers need) to be more sensitive, to ask more about the child during the parent/teacher interview, perhaps the child is going through family crises and the teacher doesn’t know, in other words to know more about the child within the context of the family; to know more about the individual situation of each child...(Toronto mother)

...teachers are not doing a good job with them and just wait so at the end of the school year they hand them to the next teacher. I believe they have to be more aware and pay more attention to see what is going on with each child: more individual attention. (Toronto mother)

In order to implement individually appropriate programs, schools need the support of their ministries of education. Teachers who wish to adapt their teaching for individual students require class sizes, support services, and other resources to enable them to do so. Making the commitment and investment required to allow teachers to better serve individual children will yield long-term benefits for Canada. The school experiences of the children of newcomers determine whether or not the potential and promise these children represent will be achieved.

The newcomer parents who participated in the Ryerson study felt it would be beneficial for teachers to know more about their children’s lives outside of school. Their preference

was to have teachers become more aware of their children in the context of their families and cultures and to consider that context when working with their children.

Many newcomer parents will welcome opportunities to share information about their children and about the family's culture. They want teachers to understand and take into account each pupil's unique qualities and circumstances.

Reach out to Newcomer Parents

The parents who participated in the research were very enthusiastic about improving their relationships with their children's schools. They see involvement in their children's education as beneficial and they want to build positive relationships with educators. The ideas they generated for relationship-building reflect their openness to the vision of partnerships. Educators and these newcomer parents are in full agreement that partnerships are desirable. Achieving the goal will require effort and commitment on the part of both schools and parents. Parents expressed their interest in learning about Canadian education and the need for initiatives to facilitate their involvement in their children's schools:

...there is the need to feel supported and being able to know how the education system works and to know that things are being done to support people who are just "getting off the train" and need the support. (Montreal mother)

(We need) to know how the education system works and ...how to seek help and how to get involved more directly. (Montreal mother)

We have talked about the need to have sessions for small groups of families according to the geographic areas they live to get information in their own language on how the education system works, and what the expectations are... even if it is not like this program, at least schools should take some steps to approach the different communities... and the schools should tell us at the same time about this country that are we integrating into... (Montreal mother)

The schools should hire more people who speak (our home language). (Statement generated by Montreal mothers and unanimously supported by them as a top priority)

The research found a specially developed series of workshops for parents to be an effective way of preparing newcomer parents to participate in their children's education. The *Canadian Parenting Workshops: Preparing Children for School Success* curriculum, delivered in the parents' home language, teaches parents how to support their children's education and encourages good working relationships with educators.

Canadian Parenting Workshops: Preparing Children for School Success is available from the Chestnut Publishing Group www.chestnutpublishing.com.

STARTING POINTS FOR EDUCATORS

Become professionally ready to work with families whose backgrounds are different from your own. Study the research that identifies best practices when working with diverse children and families. Learn to recognize the stages of adaptation and support newcomer children through each stage.

Encourage newcomer families to continue speaking their first languages at home. Become familiar with the research literature on bilingualism. It strongly supports home language maintenance. Bilingualism has important benefits for individuals, families, and society as a whole.

Extend invitations to parents to visit their children's classrooms. Get to know these parents. Encourage their ongoing participation in school activities. Make them feel welcome and create opportunities for them to become involved.

Be prepared for the possibility that the family structures of some newcomers might not be nuclear. There may be important adults besides the parents in the homes of some newcomers. Decision making regarding the children may or may not rest with the parents.

STARTING POINTS FOR MINISTRIES OF EDUCATION AND SCHOOL BOARDS

Newcomers who are in the process of learning to speak the language of instruction cannot communicate effectively with school personnel without the support of trained cultural brokers – people who know the culture and language of the parents and are familiar with the specialized vocabulary used by educators. The publicized commitment to partnerships with parents rings false without the provision of these services. Volunteer interpreters are not sufficient and children should not be put in the role of translating educator-parent conversations.

Provide facilities and encouragement and practical support for parents to develop welcoming groups that reach out and connect with newcomer families in each of the ethnic groups represented in your school community. Support groups for newcomer families provide networks of friendship for people who may be without sources of practical advice and help as they adjust to their new lives.

Provide class sizes and support services to permit adaptations for individual pupils. Provide home language assessments, reception classes, and ESL classes in schools serving newcomers.

Provide teachers, administrators, and support staff with in-service education to help them work more effectively with parents from diverse backgrounds. Ministries of education and school boards are invited to contact Professor Judith Bernhard at bernhard@ryerson.ca. Professor Bernhard and her colleagues can develop customized training programs that will prepare school personnel to develop stronger relationships with newcomer families.

STARTING POINTS FOR POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Require future educators and other school personnel to complete a broad range of electives in the humanities and social sciences during their professional education.

Include in the curricula for all future educators, administrators, and other school personnel courses that teach the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to work with families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Develop and offer continuing education courses for graduates to teach them the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to work with families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

For additional information see www.ryerson.ca/~bernhard

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