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Rethinking “Parent Involvement”: Perspectives of Immigrant and Refugee Parents

Zeynep Isik-Ercan

I arrived in the U.S. 15 years ago as a master’s student in early childhood education after teaching in elementary schools in Turkey. Becoming a permanent resident in my new country and parenting my two Turkish-American boys fueled my scholarly interest in the experiences of immigrant communities with their children’s early school years, specifically the ways they negotiate cultural and linguistic identities in educational settings. Among many encounters with my children’s teachers, one is particularly memorable.

Shortly after Enis, my older son, began attending the campus preschool at age two, his teacher asked me to speak only English at home to help with his transition into preschool. I was informed that my speaking to him in Turkish was the reason he scored low in the language development section of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire. Of course, as a doctoral student in early childhood/elementary education, I did not agree but thanked his teacher for the well-intended suggestion. Nevertheless, I do not remember being asked to be part of his classroom community or to bring in any expertise during that year.

Despite my experience and social capital as a scholar and teacher, I felt quite illiterate and vulnerable in my immigrant parent identity, dealing with a teacher who invalidated my cultural experiences and lacked interest in my family. Many memories later, my son, now a sixth grader, is a strong reader and writer and can write book chapters in both English and Turkish. Over time, I have learned to better advocate for my children, although my participation in school events has vanished over the years; admittedly, I still do not feel I belong, despite my perceived socioeconomic status.

Parent involvement has been widely discussed in the literature as an important factor in children’s educational attainment and as one of the benchmarks for multicultural education (Banks, 2013). Although educational research has long focused on the collaboration between home and school (Epstein, 2001; Martin & Hagan-Burke, 2002), immigrant parents have been expected to follow

traditional frameworks for parent involvement that are aligned with White middle class cultural values and rituals. Thus, some school practices for parent involvement might actually be barriers to parents' engagement with schools (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Sohn & Wang, 2006) if they only include traditional methods such as physically participating in and/or organizing school events (Chavkin, 1996; Sohn & Wang, 2006).

Turney and Kao (2009), in their analysis of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort, found that immigrant parents had more challenges in accessing and being involved in their children's elementary schools than White parents did, regardless of demographic and socioeconomic status. Moreover, in much of the mainstream literature, immigrant parents are represented and stereotyped as one uniform group lacking knowledge on child development and parenting (Bornstein & Cote, 2004), are unaware of how to teach their own children (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000; Doucet, 2011; Kroeger, 2014), or are unwilling to connect with schools (Becker, Klein, & Biedinger, 2013; Doucet, 2011). These deficit views of parents have shaped much work in parent involvement, assigning immigrant parents a subordinate role in school-teacher interactions.

Immigrant Parents as Experts

Immigrant parents and their children do have challenges in maintaining the connection between school and home and negotiating sociocultural backgrounds with new experiences in educational settings (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Doucet, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2007). As a result, educators must embrace the role of immigrant parents as experts in their children's lives with "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) to offer so that they can utilize these funds to build bridges between home and school through a reciprocal partnership (Souto-Manning, 2016).

Immigrant parents can be important resources for school leaders and teachers in guiding children's educational experiences in culturally responsive ways. For example, positive practices that utilize children's backgrounds – such as names or family histories – as the focus of curriculum inquiry honor identities and diversities (Souto-Manning, 2007, 2016; Doucet & Adair, 2013). Still, schools struggle to facilitate the potential role of immigrant parents as cultural mediators (Banks, 2013; Moll et al., 1992; Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Ramirez, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Souto-Manning, 2007) and as active agents of their children's learning despite the challenges they may face (Cooper, Chavira, & Mena, 2005; Sohn & Wang, 2006; Carreon, Drake, & Barton, 2005; Li, 2001). Immigrant parents' actual strengths and perspectives are rarely included in parent involvement

frameworks or curricula (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000). For example, Kroeger (2014) found that a Hmong refugee parent was reminded of his assumed deficiencies through encounters with schools despite his strong storytelling abilities and his vast knowledge of the Hmong community's rich preliterate histories and traditions, all of which could have been invaluable resources for the teachers. Over the course of the last several years, I have examined in two qualitative case studies the experiences and perspectives of Turkish-American immigrant parents (Isik-Ercan, 2010) and Burmese refugee parents (Isik-Ercan, 2012) on home-school relationships in two different U.S. Midwestern cities. In this article, I build from these earlier studies to provide examples for the interaction between immigrant parents and schools and parents' experience of parent involvement practices, either initiated by them or by the school. I begin with Turkish-American parents' perspectives on teacher-parent connections, their critique of the curriculum, their ideas on honoring children's identities, and their challenges in belonging to a school community as immigrant parents.

The Case of Turkish-American Parents

My study with Turkish-American parents focused on experiences with their children's early schooling in the U.S. All parents except one identified as Muslim. At the time of the study, Turkey was a stable democracy.¹ I conducted interviews with 18 Turkish parents from ten families about the connections they saw between home and school. Five percent of participants had graduate degrees while 75 percent of them had at least a bachelor's degree. Fifty percent of the parents had a household income of \$100,000 or higher, and 80 percent had a household income of \$45,000 or higher. Their children, at the time, were between the ages 7 and 13 but interviews specifically focused on their experiences with early years of schooling, from pre-K to third grade. Each interview lasted two to three hours. Parents referred to their current and past experiences in several different school districts.

Due to selective U.S. immigration policies, several of these parents had come to the U.S. with higher education in English and took academic or professional jobs in Midwest states, which tend to have a higher number of first and second generation immigrants. The Turkish parents I interviewed told me that academic rigor was important and expected. They found it difficult, however, to access curriculum resources and understand teaching methods in order to support their children. Schools did not have formal structures where immigrant parents could observe the curriculum approaches and methods. Some parents, such as Mr. Tekin, emphasized the importance of homework as a link between school

¹ After a July 2016 coup attempt, the Turkish president overruled the constitution by emergency decrees, resulting in an authoritarian regime, human rights violations and lack of access to justice.

and home. Mr. Hisar, although he was a scientist, still felt uncomfortable assisting his son in math and science because he did not have the necessary tools and resources:

He doesn't bring home any books or notes, he brings a few sheets for homework. When I ask where we can find the explanation of a concept in his homework, he can't access anything. For instance, even when we do simple division problems, I don't know about different symbols and systems that they learned to use in school.

Similarly, other Turkish parents in the study said that while they viewed themselves as resourceful and able to capitalize on their backgrounds and occupations, they were rarely asked to contribute to the school. Some Turkish immigrant parents, due to their own educational strengths, found an avenue to use their funds of knowledge in schools, at times without being asked. For example, Mrs. Deniz explained: "Turkish parents sometimes feel shy about approaching the teachers with our needs. We assume that we would be offered things and opportunities by default to mediate cultural differences, but we need to create the environment for these exchanges ourselves." It is interesting that while their socioeconomic resources and social class status provided these parents with a sense of self-worth, they were denied entrée to curriculum decisions and felt they were not viewed as resourceful by teachers.

Some of the Turkish parents, such as Mrs. Deniz, were more assertive and took on a cultural mediator role:

R: How did you observe Zeki become aware of his own identity when he was attending preschool?

Mrs. Deniz: He was usually happy in school. For a while, though, when I went to pick him up, he would not like me to talk in Turkish, he would say "don't talk like that."

R: When did this happen?

Mrs. Deniz: While he went to that preschool. Ironically, there were many international families there who would talk to their kids in their first languages. We would just start talking in Turkish and he did not like it. He also realized in the end of school year that he knew we had an accent, and he did not want us to speak to his friends in English either.

R: Why?

Mrs. Deniz: Because we have an accent...

R: How did you know he really felt this?

Mrs. Deniz: You just notice, he would say “don’t say it,” “you should not say,” “don’t say it like that.” Anyway, when he was in preschool, there was something like that. We talked with his teachers.

R: What did you talk about?

Mrs. Deniz: I told her that I do not want my child to feel like that, I said: “you could help me by praising his culture and language at times.”

R: So you actually asked them...

Mrs. Deniz: I requested that, they are usually very open and supportive about that issue. There are many international kids there. Saying things like “Wow, this is a beautiful word, how do you know this?” I think for a while they asked him to teach a few Turkish words to other kids. I think each student taught something in their own language. I don’t remember in detail, but at least to honor the richness the children...

This quote is interesting in that parents offered their perspective on how to recognize a child’s identity within a context of academic learning, thereby situating a child in a leadership position in the classroom. It is also interesting that the parent did not suggest assimilating into the mainstream culture of the classroom but rather embracing differences as a positive asset in the classroom.

Turkish parents, particularly mothers, negotiated access to their children’s school by physically attending cultural events at the school. Some parents visited the schools and made presentations on Turkey and Turkish culture, while others offered their technical help in areas such as creating graphics or supporting the PTA. A few other parents in the study reported feeling nervous about not feeling welcome in schools in their Muslim identity, particularly wearing a hijab.

Some of the parents in the study wanted, and even expected, teachers to approach and inquire about the family's cultural and linguistic practices. Mrs. Ada explained: "Maybe during special holidays or occasions, I would like the teachers to indicate an interest and acceptance of their students' culture." Frustrated that the teacher failed to push her son academically, Mrs. Hisar voiced an expectation for rigor in content learning, which is part of her cultural experience as an academically oriented individual:

I wish the teachers asked where we come from, and how the educational system is run in Turkey. They have no idea about education or culture in other countries. When I ask my son to study harder, he would easily say, "My teacher thinks this is sufficient." It helps if the teachers know my cultural expectations.

It is important to note that the typical elementary school structure in Turkey includes continuity of care, so a teacher typically begins with a group in first grade and continues in this role with the same group of children until fifth grade. Mrs. Gece explained the historical understanding of the teacher's role in Turkish tradition:

The relationship between teacher and student is like a mother/father and child relationship which lasts for a few years in the same class. The teachers are the third authority figure in the children's worlds. The children love their teachers and see them as role models, even exceeding the authority of their parents.

Mrs. Gece was alluding to the cultural perspective that a teacher is expected to show the indication of care, which is a desire to build a personal connection with parents, and also expected to set up some individual goals for the child in their academic path. This helps explain Turkish parents' cultural perspectives on the role of the teacher.

Next, I focus on how newly arrived Burmese refugee parents talked about their challenges with the teacher-parent connection, their struggles in understanding curriculum, and their suggestions for how to connect to the school community as immigrant parents.

The Case of Burmese Parents

I interviewed 28 Burmese parents from 25 families in another Midwest city that has a big concentration of resettled Burmese from refugee camps in Thailand. They initially had to leave Burma (Myanmar) due

to a decades-long civil war. They settled in refugee camps in Thailand before coming to the U.S. Some of the parents began living in the camp when they were children themselves. I call the participants Burmese parents because they identified themselves as “from Burma” and would not necessarily elaborate on their subethnic groups with people not familiar with social patterns in Myanmar.

Semi-structured interviews lasted around one-and-a-half hours for each Burmese parent. Participants had multiple children in various stages of their education, but the topic of interviews specifically focused on their experiences with the early years of schooling, from Pre-K to third grade. Fourteen of these Burmese parents were Muslim, 13 were Buddhist, and one was Christian. None of the participant parents had English proficiency or a bachelor’s degree. All of the parents had incomes lower than \$30,000 a year.

Burmese culture historically places a high value on education and respecting teachers (UNESCO, 1986). The parents we interviewed had positive perspectives toward schooling in the U.S. They often referred to U.S. education as the “best in the world” and stated that providing their children a great education was the main reason for choosing the U.S. for their resettlement.

Despite the language challenges they faced, most of the Burmese refugee parents reported a keen interest in their children’s education and displayed a desire to be more connected to school culture and to the teachers. Ms. Ma Chime reported: “When I go to school, they are welcoming to me, they respect me. I only went to parent-teacher conferences. It is hard to get to know the teachers. I would love to get closer and get to know them.” All but one of the participant parents wanted the teachers to do home visits, which they said would help the teachers understand the child’s family context.

Burmese homes and apartments tended to be located in the same neighborhoods so that the community could stay close together. Although hospitality is an important cultural value in Burmese culture, the school districts have not employed this practice of connecting to families. This sociocultural characteristic was a missed opportunity for the school to have district-level initiatives for home visits and potential after-school activities that could be created in collaboration with families.

While Burmese parents were not as quick to criticize schooling practices as the Turkish parents, they still struggled with a lack of connection to school staff and culture. Some felt they were not recognized as knowledgeable partners. Some participants showed fierce advocacy even within a system they don’t understand and with which they are told not to interfere. Ms. ija’s story of her son being placed in the

wrong class reveals some of the power dynamics parents face and how parent ideas might be ignored despite appeals.

Ms. Khatija: The children are so young right now, they fit right into their classes, so they don't have a lot of challenges. They are growing up and really learn fast. We came here in February. When my oldest child, Ye-Win started school, he started on third grade. He was then 6, but they put a wrong birthdate on his UN profile. In this profile, he was 9. That is why they put him in the third grade when he came. He began the third grade, but he did not know anything. ESL classes helped him a bit.

R: Did you explain the situation to school administrators?

Ms. Khatija: He was surviving third grade, but it got worse over time. I wanted to change it, but they said it would take so long to change his profile information. I told about this to the translator, but the school folks first did not change it, and they did not do anything. For so many times, I tried to explain his age is not correct, his grade should be different. But they were just looking at the documents and they asked for more documents proving my point. However, he was born in Burma and it is extremely hard getting documents from another country.

R: So they insisted he stay in the current grade.

Ms. Khatija: He spent that year in the third grade and next year he went to the fourth grade. But he began to fail in the classes. The following year, he was going to the fifth grade and it was mid-year, so they held a big meeting where we met with the principal. Then they decided to put him in the second grade last year instead of fifth grade. This is his fourth year in school and he is in third grade back again. He was very happy to be able to return to the second grade. The work was not hard and his social adjustment was good. Now back at third grade, he is still weak in reading and in other subjects, he is doing O.K. He regularly reads at home.

Despite multiple attempts by the parent, Ye-Win was placed in the wrong grade. His mother found it very difficult to confront the school about their policy, abiding by it until everyone recognized that the decision was detrimental to the child's growth. She was not seen as an expert on her own child, whether it was because of her immigrant status or economic status or language barriers. Her concerns – which turned out to be accurate and problematic – were not taken seriously by the school.

While teachers too often assume that immigrant parents are unable or unwilling to be involved in their children's education, all of the Burmese parents I interviewed reported that they attend parent-teacher conferences. They told me that these conferences were an important event for them, the only occasion that allowed them to communicate with the teacher because the schools had no other parent-teacher communication practices. Parents reported disappointedly, however, that parent-teacher conferences only lasted about 15 minutes and were often superficial and overly formal encounters.

Ms. Chesa commented on the limited communication opportunities with teachers, stemming from a lack of school resources:

Her homework was the reason why we got a phone call from the school. The homework went incomplete, and the teacher called us for that. The translator explained how to do the homework on the phone and at times, they sent us Burmese letters. We fortunately have a translator in the school. But still, sometimes I don't understand the translator. At times, the translator does not speak clearly, his pronunciation might be different because of dialects. So, I could not always clearly understand the issues.

Other parents brought up the issue that during parent-teacher conferences, only one or two translators would be available for the many parents who needed them. While aware of their own lack of access to formal education in the refugee camps, the Burmese parents were very clear about what they required in order to establish better home-school connections. Several parents identified their need to be more knowledgeable about what their children were learning and how they were learning.

Teachers and school personnel who worked with the Burmese parents I interviewed seemed unaware of the important funds of knowledge these parents had to offer. For instance, all Burmese households had internet connections and the children were highly active in computer use, social media, and gaming, partially due to the Burmese diaspora's communication needs with family and friends in Myanmar and globally. This untapped resource for bidirectional information flow was never used, as parents always received documents and information on paper. In addition, each Burmese household had neighbors with older children who often informally guided their younger siblings' homework when parents could not understand the directions. A community organization had also arranged after-school tutoring programs that the teachers could have used more intentionally had the schools reached out to the communities.

A Comparison of Experiences of Turkish-American and Burmese American parents

These two studies indicate that socioeconomic and cultural differences influenced parent critiques of classroom and school practices and perhaps enabled Turkish parents to advocate more effectively for their children than the Burmese parents. However, there were missed opportunities and home-school disconnects in both cases. Most of the parents I interviewed wanted to be more closely connected to the schools by frequently visiting the school, communicating more often with the teachers, and supporting academic work at home such as by helping with homework. Yet Burmese refugee parents were virtually non-existent at their children's schools. They had great difficulty being present or involved in the traditional sense and keeping track of their children's progress, despite their desire to do so.

Turkish immigrant parents and Burmese refugee parents both faced barriers to their involvement in schooling even though they were eager to build relationships with teachers. One sentiment that was shared by both sets of parents was that communication between themselves and teachers was neither reciprocal nor satisfying. They believed that school policies and instructional practices were created with mainstream parents in mind and were not made explicit to newly immigrant parents. Both sets of parents had ideas for alternative forms of communication that were culturally important to them and that would honor their identities. Burmese parents struggled with understanding school policies, curriculum, and school culture. Turkish parents displayed a more critical view of school policies and curriculum and focused on the process of learning and methods. Burmese parents expressed a dissatisfaction with structural elements and policies put in place that became a barrier for their understanding curriculum and instruction as well as high-stakes decisions that impacted their children.

All of the parents I interviewed had funds of knowledge they could offer teachers and schools. Turkish parents seemed to capitalize on several opportunities, such as visiting the classrooms, volunteering, and presenting, although without being involved in decision-making bodies such as school boards or parent boards. While being physically distant from the schools, Burmese parents had access to neighborhood support systems such as older children who were relatives, social support, and internet connections that could have been utilized by teachers to provide children with educational opportunities and supports. The Burmese parents stated they would have been available to visit schools and volunteer had there been transportation opportunities. It seemed that the inflexible structures of traditional parent involvement models limited their potential contribution to their children's school experiences.

The Future of Parent-Home Interaction for Immigrant Parents

There are various ways immigrant parents' educational, cultural, religious, financial, linguistic, and demographic experiences interact with their relationship with schools and shape their expectations for educators (Guo, 2017). These immigrant parent experiences have important implications for school policies. For this reason, it is crucial for schools to initiate conversations with diverse parent groups about culturally relevant home-school partnerships (Adair, 2012). Teachers with immigrant backgrounds can play important roles in these partnerships (Adair, 2016). School leaders can shape policy that will encourage immigrant parents' communication, visibility, and physical existence in schools. Arrangements should be made for parents who would like to visit their child's classroom and informally act as classroom volunteers for a period to learn about the culture of the school, instructional methods, the use of curriculum, routines and rituals of school life, procedures and policies, and the style of communication used (e.g., jargon).

For the sake of routine, safety, and building classroom community, school policies do not usually allow parental visits outside volunteering. However, parents often feel intimidated by the abundance of information coming from their children without seeing firsthand the school context and a typical school day, including schedules, rituals, and pedagogies. Allowing parents to use the school bus or go to a space for parents in schools would be helpful in eliminating the anxiety about an unknown school context.

Immigrant parents' participation may not necessarily resemble conventional practices such as joining parent-teacher associations, attending field trips or school events, or volunteering as needed in the traditional sense. For instance, all but one of the Burmese parents and all Turkish parents wished to be in closer contact with classroom teachers in a personal fashion, such as through home visits or cultural exchanges. Therefore, schools should seek alternative ways to connect with immigrant parents, recognizing individual and group perspectives as they set developmental and academic goals for immigrant children (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016).

While immigrant parents face real barriers, such as transportation and language in the case of Burmese parents and time constraints for Turkish parents, these barriers can be overcome by school policies that are unconventional and out of the comfort zone, but beneficial to the school and children in the community. Classroom blogs, internet boards where parents can access information and samples of children's work, and have opportunities to translate information via translator applications would

allow parents to see curriculum and instruction more closely. Using photo and video to show what happens in each stage of the school day might support parents' understanding of the curriculum and open opportunities for conversations at home about the school day. Finally, this practice could support parents and children by empowering them to use technologies for academic success beyond entertainment and gaming.

We need to recognize that parents can only contribute to educators' knowledge about children and their communities if they have access to curriculum and instructional resources and the cultural knowledge about schools and classrooms in the U.S. (Ladky & Peterson, 2008). This way, they could be funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) for classroom teachers, who need to reach all learners but often are limited in their understanding of immigrant students' and parents' perspectives on education. My journey to explore smaller immigrant communities, the ways they negotiate their cultural identities and connect to or disengage from school, and the funds of knowledge they can offer will continue to ensure their voices are heard and honored in school practices. A stronger connection between teachers and parents can boost children's outcomes and honor the voices and identities of immigrant parents.

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