

The Shadow of Colonialism on Relations Between Immigrant Parents and Their Children's Teachers

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Using a theoretical framework that integrates socio-cultural theory, postcolonial perspectives, and the ethic of care, we (a) characterize the relationship between immigrant parents and their children's teachers, (b) offer reasons for the relationship, and (c) suggest some strategies for improving them. Several focus group discussions were held with both groups, in elementary as well as secondary schools. The analysis shows that immigrant parents and their children's teachers view each other through lens shaped by their colonial legacies, and have different role and communicative expectations from each other based on prior assumptions and experiences. Both groups need to acknowledge and confront these differences, keeping in mind that mutually respectful relationships between them are crucial for children's success in schools.

Nous nous appuyons sur un cadre théorique qui intègre la théorie socioculturelle, des perspectives postcoloniales et l'éthique relative aux soins, nous (a) caractérisons le rapport entre les parents immigrants et les enseignants de leurs enfants, (b) offrons des raisons pour ce rapport et (c) proposons des stratégies pour les améliorer. Plusieurs discussions ont eu lieu avec les deux groupes, tant dans des écoles élémentaires que des écoles secondaires. L'analyse démontre que les parents immigrants et les enseignants de leurs enfants se perçoivent par le biais de leurs patrimoines coloniaux d'une part, et que leurs attentes relatives aux rôles et à la communication de part et d'autre sont différentes et reposent sur des hypothèses et expériences antérieures d'autre part. Compte tenu du rôle crucial des rapports mutuellement respectueux entre les parents et les enseignants dans la réussite des enfants à l'école, les deux groupes doivent reconnaître ces différences et les affronter.

Educational researchers generally agree that teachers and students' parents' relationships make a crucial difference to children's academic and social integration in schools (Crozier, 2000; Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Epstein, 1995; Fan, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lawson, 2003). A robust body of literature indicates what this relationship should look like (e.g., Kalyanpur & Harry, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Seidl & Friend, 2002). Several researchers suggest that trusting, collaborative relationships in which power and responsibility is shared, and where class and cultural differences are recognized and respected, encourage parental involvement in their children's schooling. Higher levels of parental involvement are associated with regular attendance, better grades, and higher rates of graduation and post-secondary education. Some investigators have identified racial, cultural, and social class differences between teachers and parents from minority groups as important

factors in parent-teacher relationships (see Dei, 2006; Glick & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Graue, 2005; Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; Kao, 2004; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Turney & Kao, 2009). However, there are only a few fine-grained studies (see Brantlinger, 2003; Graue, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) that indicate why and how these differences shape relationships between minority parents and their children's teachers.

The present study focuses on the relationship between immigrant parents and their children's teachers. It addresses the following questions:

1. What do immigrant parents and their children's teachers think about each other?
2. What do they expect from each other?
3. How do they communicate?
4. What may help them develop mutually supportive relationships?

Canada receives about 125,000 immigrants every year, including many parents of school-age children. In the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest in the country, about four fifths of the 265,000 students have one or both parents who were born outside the country (O'Reilly & Yau, 2009). While the high provincial test scores of some immigrants' children may lead to complacency among parents and educators, there is growing recognition that the aggregated achievement data of children of immigrants disguises the challenges faced by some sub-groups, who are failing or dropping out of schools, suspended or expelled, streamed into non-academic courses, and diagnosed with learning disabilities in disproportionate numbers (Anisef, Brown, Phythian, Sweet, & Walters, 2008, Glick & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Kao & Tienda, 2005).

A large majority of teachers are White, middle-class women who have not had sustained or close contact with immigrant families, or sufficient preparation for working with them (Bernhard, 2010; Graue, 2005). Meanwhile, immigrant families in Canada come from over 200 countries, with different languages, cultures, religions, and a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds (Scott, Selbee, & Reed, 2006). Recent immigrants to Canada have mostly come from former colonies of European states. According to the census data (Statistics Canada, 2010), about 60% of immigrants arriving between 2001 and 2006 have come to Canada from Asia and the Middle East, a region where most countries were colonized by the British and other European countries.

In this paper we use data from focus group discussions with several groups of immigrant parents and teachers of immigrant children to explore their perceptions about and expectations of each other, as well as their communication patterns. Using a theoretical framework that integrates socio-cultural theory, postcolonial perspectives, and the ethic of care, we characterize the relationships between the immigrant parents and their children's teachers, offer reasons for those relationships, and suggest some strategies for improving them.

Theoretical foundations and related literature

We draw upon three theoretical stands to weave the central argument: (a) socio-cultural theory, (b) postcolonial perspectives, and (c) the ethic of care.

Building upon Vygotsky's (1978) seminal work, contemporary scholars have developed a variety of constructs collectively referred to as socio-cultural theory. Researchers using this

framework emphasize the role of historical, socio-political, and communicative contexts in which learning and teaching takes place. Social values, practices, and relationships define what is learned, how, and who is included or excluded from the opportunity to acquire socio-cultural knowledge. Lim and Renshaw (2001) remind us that cultures influence our deeply held beliefs, values, and practices. However, societal and institutional cultures can also rapidly change as a result of new ideas and events, communication technologies, and large-scale migration. Suárez-Orozco (2001) points out that in a rapidly changing and increasingly interdependent world, cultures, languages, and nations no longer occupy the same geographic space. Suárez-Orozco, as well as other scholars (e.g., Lipsky & Gartner, 1997), proposes that in this era of globalization, schooling more than ever before profoundly shapes the current and future well-being of children, communities, and societies.

Lave and Wenger (1995) use the notion of "communities of practice" to draw attention to social structures within which members of a group implicitly share bodies of knowledge, values, and habits of the mind, forms and processes of communication, language and representations. Lim and Renshaw (2001) tell us that participation in such communities is made possible by shared implicit and explicit knowledge, individual and collective action, and engagement through material and semiotic cultural tools. Teachers in Canadian public schools constitute one such community because of their common cultural and socio-economic background, their professional training, and the institutional milieus in which they work (see Crozier, 2000; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). Graue (2005) suggests that teachers believe they have normative knowledge about child development, technical and theoretical knowledge about teaching, and the wisdom of experience garnered from having worked with many children. Immigrant parents are clearly outside this community, and unfamiliar with its norms. Unlike Canadian-born parents, they have not even had the opportunity to learn about this community by observing Canadian school practices during their own schooling (Graue, 2005; Lortie, 1975).

Immigrants to Canada do not necessarily have a pre-established community upon their arrival in this country. However, they share with other immigrants, to varying degrees, several features of the immigrant experience, for example, difficulties in finding appropriate jobs, learning the official languages, and dealing with various forms of discrimination (Ali, 2008). These common experiences create their "community" although its members may have different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Scott, Selbee, & Reed, 2006).

As noted above, most new immigrants to Canada come from former colonies. It is important to remember that colonial relations among nation states are not limited to countries formally ruled by foreign powers, and do not necessarily end when foreign occupation ends. China, for example, was not formally colonized, but was more affected by colonialism than many other countries that were. As Porter (2009) reports, Britain's periodic military threats, imposition of unequal treaties, and economic and cultural isolation of China resulted in a deep sense of humiliation among its people, which was undeniably an acute form of colonial oppression. In addition, as Loomba (1998) points out, colonialism did not end with the formal dissolution of colonial rule because "both the 'metropolis' and the 'colony' were deeply altered by the colonial process" (p. 19). In the current context, the flow of immigration from former colonies to Western countries is in and of itself an indicator of their continuing neo-colonial relationship (Bhabha, 1994).

Postcolonial scholars have persuasively argued that the cultural imperialism resulting from formal colonialism continues to shape political, economic, and social relations among people

from the First and the Third World. Western intellectuals who have studied colonized people and places have created a systematic body of knowledge that reproduces images of colonized people primarily as deficient and primitive, in order to control them. Said (1978) referred to this as Orientalism. Fanon (1961) and others (e.g., Hage, 2000; Loomba, 1998; Spivak, 1999) have pointed out that colonized people have not been able to challenge these images even after the formal dissolution of European empires, partly because of their continued socio-economic and political subjugation, and partly because they have internalized images of themselves as represented in colonial discourses.

A frequent thread in Canadian immigrants' discourse is their concern for their children's success in school, which they strongly believe is the pathway to socio-economic success in the new country (Ali & Kilbride, 2004; Anisef et al., 2010). Many of them also recognize that their children's integration in school critically depends on their collaboration with teachers (Chang, Park, Singh, & Sung, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gonzales & Moll, 2002). Norms in Canadian schools about what should be taught and how, are based primarily on the European cultural heritage of curriculum designers, teacher educators, school-board trustees, and school administrators. This community is further circumscribed by the professional culture of teachers/educators (Crozier, 2000). Parents who are able to appropriate the tools of discourse that enable them to engage with this community, are able to exercise some agency in influencing its decisions, at least in matters related to their own children's education (Brantlinger, 2003). Those who do not have these tools are silenced (Crozier, 2000; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

For children of immigrants the school is the primary, sometimes only, point of regular and sustained contact with the new society. For many of their parents it is often the first and the most consistent site of engagement with a Canadian institution, especially for those who work and live in ethnically segregated enclaves (Ali & Kilbride, 2004). Pratt (as cited in Loomba, 1998) calls this "the contact zone" where "disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (p. 68). The following questions arise from this interaction:

1. What happens in the contact zone between teachers and immigrant parents?
2. How does this interaction reinforce or challenge their power differential?
3. Why should teachers care about building these relationships?

Nodding's (1984) influential work on the ethics of care distinguishes between "natural" caring, such as that of a mother, and "ethical" caring which evokes the sentiment "... 'I must' – in response to the plight of the other and our conflicting desire to serve our own interest" (pp. 79-80). She explains that this sentiment is not based on a sense of obligation but arises from a commitment to a moral ideal of oneself. Thus in caring for others we affirm our own sense of self.

Caring involves relationships rather than specific roles, consideration of the whole person who is cared-for, and a commitment to understanding and respecting his/her point of view through responsive listening and dialogue. As a teacher, caring for children obviously involves getting to know where they are coming from, and building a strong relationship with their parents to help ensure their success. This would require a dialogue with the parents in a "common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation" to build up "a substantial

knowledge of one another that serves to guide our [caring] responses" (Noddings, 1992, p. 23). The carer's full, receptive attention, guided by the question "What are you going through?" is what Noddings (2002, p. 17) calls *engrossment*. The role of teachers in establishing and maintaining caring relationships is highlighted by Noddings (2005), especially with reference to their position as models of ethical caring. Speaking as a teacher, she says "... I am first and foremost one caring and second, enactor of specialized functions. As teacher, I am, first, one-caring." (p. 176).

Methodology

Our goal in this study was to elicit immigrant parents' and their children's teachers' perceptions about their relationships with each other. A qualitative approach was best suited to this purpose. While recognizing that our conceptual frameworks shaped the entire study, we used grounded theory as a strategy to generate, organize, and analyze the data.

Following the approval of a university's as well as a school board's research ethics committees, the research team identified several schools with a high immigrant student population with the help of a school board official. All the schools in this list were contacted and the first five to respond positively were included in the study. Two of the schools were secondary and three were elementary level. All of them were located in middle- to low-income neighbourhoods with several apartment buildings in the catchment area, where immigrant families tend to live in the first few years after their arrival in Canada (Preston, Murdie, D'Addario, Sibanda, & Murnaghan, 2011).

The principals in each school were contacted and asked to facilitate teacher and parent participation in the study by sending out information about the study in whichever form they deemed appropriate, including announcements at meetings, bulletin board notices, and flyers. About 4 to 7 teachers in each school volunteered to participate in the study, and in some cases this group included school administrators, and English as a Second Language (ESL) and Special Needs teachers. Altogether 29 teachers, including 26 females and three males, participated in the study. Six groups of immigrant parents, mostly mothers, with children in the same schools also agreed to participate in the study. The parents' groups consisted of those who used the following first languages: (a) Arabic (from different states in the Middle East), (b) Creole (from the Caribbean), (c) Mandarin (from mainland China), (d) Russian (from former Soviet Union states), (e) Somali (from Somalia), and (f) Urdu (from Pakistan). Two fathers also participated in the focus groups, which consisted of 4 to 6 persons each. A total of 32 parents contributed to the data set.

Our data collection tool was a very loosely structured guide for facilitating focus group discussions (see Appendix). Each focus group session lasted between one-and-a-half to two hours, and most of them were held in the staff room at the participating schools after school hours. The discussions with parents were held in their first language, albeit they were frequently interspersed with English. The facilitators of these discussions were trained bilingual research assistants, most of whom were graduate students. The sessions were video-taped, and the conversations were translated and transcribed in English by the research assistants. While we recognize that translations can never fully capture the full and nuanced meanings of respondents, it was necessary for us to have all the data available in a language we could work with. We also acknowledge that verification by certified translators could enhance the accuracy of translations, but lacking the funds for this we trusted the bilingual research assistants to

accurately transcribe and translate the data.

Our analysis was guided by the research questions, and conducted by the team of researchers and graduate students who collectively identified the central themes and their sub-categories by reading the translated transcripts several times and identifying patterns in the data. We then created web diagrams (see Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify associated concepts, the nature of their linkages, and their relative significance. The codes generated by the webbing exercise were organized hierarchically according to main and subsidiary ideas. Finally, memos (see Maxwell, 2005) on selected themes were written up, linking the conceptual categories to the data and the literature. Some of these were further developed and fine-tuned by establishing coherent linkages among them and selecting the most relevant illustrative quotes, for the following section.

Findings

In this section we describe what immigrant parents and their children's teachers think about each other, how they expect each other to enact their roles as parents or teachers, and how they communicate with each other.

Views about each other

Some teachers in the focus group acknowledged that they had limited information about perspectives, prior experiences, beliefs, and parenting practices of immigrant parents of children they were teaching. For example, speaking about the familial background of an immigrant child, an ESL teacher said, "It's a guessing game because you patch it together." However, another claimed, "And just speaking with some parents, I know about the community," indicating that she believed she could generalize to the ethno-linguistic community what she had learned from talking to a few parents. Most of the teachers in the focus groups readily identified attributes of immigrant parents based on their personal experiences or from what they had learned from other sources.

Some teachers made claims about immigrant parents in general, while others chose to characterize particular ethnic groups. For example, several suggested that (a) immigrant parents worked for long hours in low-income, low-status jobs; (b) lived in cramped apartments; (c) were very ambitious for their children; and (d) were always respectful in their interactions with teachers. Most agreed that immigrant parents' ambitions for their children made the children over-competitive. For example, some children asked for their peers' grades in order to assess their own performance in comparison to others. Teachers reported that some parents did their children's homework, and others asked for more to be assigned, so their children's academic performance would be highly rated. Parents were reported to have turned up in large numbers for meetings related to Education Quality and Accountability Office tests or spelling bee competitions. One teacher thought that immigrant parents had not learned to discipline their children, or build strong relationships with them, because they shared childcare with "a huge network of family to help." Another commented that immigrant parents maintained frequent contact with "huge extended families back home" and theorized that relating stories of their children's success in school helped them "save face" as they themselves were spinning downwards in socio-economic status.

Teachers thought Chinese parents in particular were very hard-working and overly ambitious for their children. They reported that some parents sent their children for private

tutoring and were not satisfied even when their children received marks of 80% or 90%. One teacher commented that because of the one-child policy in China, children were highly self-centered and did not know how to share materials or teachers' attention. Pakistani parents were believed to have come from war-torn rural environments, were known to be conservative in their values, and were thought to have strong discriminatory beliefs and practices based on gender. Somali origin families were thought to have come from refugee camps, to be lacking fluency in English, and their children were considered academically poorly prepared.

Many parents similarly held stereotypes about teachers. While some pointed out individual instances of individual teacher's sensitivity and generosity, at the same time they characterized them collectively as being biased against immigrant parents, and having low academic expectations of their children. A few parents also said it was pointless to complain against teachers who neglected their children because, unlike the school systems in their countries of origin, the teachers were not accountable to school administrators or to parents.

Among parents who spoke positively about teachers were those who said some teachers made their children feel welcome by (a) asking them to share information about their cultural practices, (b) accommodating their religious needs, (c) giving the children cards of appreciation, and (d) informing parents about their children's successes. A mother described how a teacher made a special effort to speak slowly and use gestures to help her non-English-speaking child in class, when she could have simply ignored him.

However, most parents claimed that teachers were prejudiced against them because of their race, ethnicity, religion, immigrant status, and presumed socio-economic status. A parent stated:

If the person speaks the language and has knowledge, you will feel that that person is respected because you know the rules, culture and habits, and you have more resources. Your level of education and that of the teacher are the same and you can communicate with the teacher easier. But if the person does not speak the language or does not understand the system, and is Black, the children and their parents will not be respected in the school.

A mother reported that teachers spoke to her very loudly and treated her as if she was "stupid" when she wore her traditional dress to the school. She said "Not speaking the language does not mean we are not educated." One of the parents claimed:

The teacher in the good neighbourhood where people are educated and go to work tries hard to educate the students on the curriculum, but in certain neighbourhoods where poor people or immigrants, who do not know the system, live, the teachers take advantage and don't teach the students well.

A Muslim mother made the following plea:

I just want to tell the teachers here, please don't look down on our culture. Don't look at someone wearing a veil and degrade her. Learn more. We are people who have an excellent history. You can learn a lot about it if you ask, or read. We are people who have values, morals, principles. We are people who have nothing to do with those causing bombs, the terrorists, we have nothing to do with them. We did not vote for them. They caused the bombing and are responsible for their own actions. You in your country, there are lots of criminals who you are not responsible for, so don't make us and our kids pay for others' faults or mistakes.

Role expectations based on prior experiences / assumptions

Immigrant parents held expectations of their children's teachers that were formed through their own experiences of schooling (Elbaz, 1994; Lortie, 1975) and/or observations of teachers' roles in their countries of origin. A typical response from many parents was, "I thought things were like back home schools." Others added that they had learned "how things worked" in their children's current schools over the years, but a parent stated:

It would be nice if the teachers realized that we are newcomers . . . that they should not deal with us in the way they deal with people born here, because we come from different systems and different schools.

A teacher also recognized that such differences existed but were not acknowledged until there was a specific need to identify them:

. . . the parents, they have expectations from the school based on the expectations back home, and the school has expectations from parents based on the Canadian way, and [neither of them] don't know that they are actually different expectations most of the time, until there is [need for] a clarification.

Parents of children in elementary schools repeatedly talked about the teachers' role as an extension of the parental role, because they are not just responsible for children's academic learning but also for teaching them moral values and standards of appropriate behavior. A mother said:

But teachers at school must have a role, not only to teach subjects . . . that students don't raise their voice, [don't] take things that don't belong to them . . . teach them some morals and manners.

In contrast, some teachers made it clear that they did not see themselves extending their roles into parenting. In one focus group a teacher talked about this at length:

The parents really ask us to do what in our perceptions is their job around parenting. So, they'll for instance say, you know, so-and-so won't listen to me. Could you please tell him to brush his teeth . . . will you tell the child not to do this, or reprimand them. And I always tell them this is your child, not my child, and you have to be the person they look to, otherwise one day he will start thinking the teacher is more important than you . . . they have to take ownership of the child and it's very hard for the parents to get around to that.

Many parents expected teachers to be the primary motivators for their children to strive for academic success. They related examples of their own academic successes and failures to illustrate that teachers make a crucial difference to student motivation. Explaining how their own education had enabled them to migrate to Canada, they said they expected their children's academic achievements to advance their social and material position in this country.

Parents of children in high school particularly emphasized teachers' roles in preparing them for admission to good universities, both by providing appropriate guidance on course selection and demanding high academic performance. A parent stated:

Canadian principals and teachers are deeply convinced that all children who come to high school already know the rules of the game. They have no idea that there can be different rules of the game, that people can have different expectations.

A father who realized his son had to take additional courses to qualify for university entrance because he had not taken appropriate courses in Grade 9, felt betrayed:

We had such trust in the system, trust in teachers, trust in people who take the child and are responsible for his future . . . We just didn't have any information . . . no one talked to us, and we generally experienced a very neglectful attitude.

Several parents thought the work their children did in Canadian schools was well below their grade level in schools in their countries of origin. Comparing the two, a father said it was three grades below in mathematics and two in science. In another group a father said that he expected teachers to be experts in subject matter knowledge. In his son's school a physical education teacher was appointed to teach science, but did not know the subject well enough to teach it. The father volunteered to teach some topics but his offer was not taken up. Nonetheless, teachers did not necessarily agree with parents' assessment of the curriculum. One of them stated "Our curriculum is quite a bit denser in terms of content," and others reported that immigrant children were used to "drill" and textual analysis, but did not really comprehend the material they were taught.

Teachers' efforts to motivate children were considered important by the parents. A mother described how her daughter and other ESL children in the class where she volunteered reacted when they got "a magic teacher" substituting for a few weeks:

Before, they were like little mice hidden somewhere and dare not to talk in class. When this teacher was with them they all dared to talk in class and express their opinions. So all of a sudden her English was improved a lot and she became much more eloquent.

In the teachers' groups there was no discussion of their roles as motivators for high academic performance. In fact, most of them thought immigrant parents unnecessarily pressured their children by their over-emphasis on academic performance. An illustrative response was:

Even when the student goes home with a 90%, the parents want to know why they failed to get the 10%.

Communication/interactions

Both groups agreed that teachers and school administrators controlled the patterns of communication and interactions between them. A teacher confirmed this by stating, "We are in a position to decide by, sort of, controlling the flow of information."

Parents in all six parents' focus group discussions consistently emphasized teachers' roles in providing timely and appropriate information about their children's conduct in school. One parent said, "... teachers should warn us as soon as there is another concern." Another complained:

... the school does not care at all. [My son] started skipping classes and I found out when it was already too late. He started to mix with the wrong crowd.

But some teachers thought they should exercise discretion over what they told parents because they did not want to “put stress on a family that is already stressed out,” or that the consequences for their students may be too harsh. A teacher explained:

... in high school you don't want to tell a parent your daughter is missing from class because she's got a boyfriend. Because, well, the first thing the father is going to do is take [her] out of this school and put her in an Islamic school, or worse he is going to send her back to Pakistan, and there she goes.

According to teachers, immigrant parents needed information about the school system, consequences of students' unacceptable behavior in school such as suspension and expulsion, homework, provisions for ESL and other special needs. Some teachers also thought it was important for them to provide information on better parenting. Quotes such as the following are illustrative:

They want their kids to be successful . . . they just don't know how to do it.

How do we give, how do we help them get control over the kids? They're not gonna learn it unless they watch TVO (Television Ontario), they are not gonna learn how to do it in our style.

School administrators and teachers stated that they tried to organize parenting lectures and workshops, but claimed that attendance by immigrant parents was often poor. “Our first night is massive and then it dwindles to about three” a teacher said. In addition, teachers were not quite sure what parents actually learned because of their passivity. One of them commented:

[Parents are] so respectful that they are often quite comfortable sitting and nodding but not actually asking questions and so you never really know, much like the students, how much they're really taking in.

Another said: “Parents are not very vocal. They are unsure.” Yet another added, “they say ‘I am sorry’ which they almost always do for one reason or another.” One teacher attributed this passivity to lack of trust.

Because of their attitude, that ‘you are a stranger, you do not belong to my community, you do not understand me, nor do you understand my background or my culture’ . . . They need to protect themselves, or they want to pretend, or show you that they know, okay, they are not from nowhere, they know, they are here, they have a background . . . they just need reassurance . . . lots of reassurance that it's alright, it will be okay, take it easy, we're not here to judge you or judge your child.

Almost all teachers said they encouraged immigrant parents to contact them but they stated only the highly educated ones did. A few teachers thought that immigrant parents could learn English as well as Canadian ways of parenting by volunteering for the school. One of them said:

They learn by osmosis. They are able to go back home and change their own practice of parenting and teaching . . . I am quite sure they must be sharing it with other mothers.

But teachers also reported they had many more volunteers than they could accommodate. Probed further, they acknowledged that parents who volunteered in their classes were mostly White non-immigrants because they were fluent in English and familiar with "the system." When immigrant parents were asked about volunteering in their children's schools, they said they were mostly assigned to raising funds, a few were asked to organize events such as "Heritage Day," and fewer still were asked to supervise children during field trips or to help in the classroom. This was corroborated by a mother who said, "For us, whenever there is a parents meeting, it means there is another fund-raising."

Speaking about why parents may be hesitant to contact teachers, a mother said, "I had to *encourage* myself to go to the school." She and other mothers added that they were afraid of repercussions for their children, if they were perceived to be "complaining" about something. Some parents felt powerless to speak, especially if their early encounters with the school staff were intimidating. Relating her experience of trying to get her children admitted to what she thought were appropriate schools and grades, a mother said:

They said 'we sent you to another school and that is where your children should go.' I mean they scolded us. . . . Obviously, because we were new here we couldn't say much. . . . We didn't argue with them. So, our three children were given admission in Grade 9. We didn't know the law, how we should express ourselves, how we should behave. We quietly picked up our bags and went to the other school . . . and because of this my children suffered a loss.

Both teachers and parents agreed that parents' lack of fluency in English was an important reason why communication between teachers and parents was difficult. They claimed that timely and reliable interpretation services were difficult to access and schools had to rely on children as translators, which left both groups wondering if what they wanted to say had been accurately communicated. However, both groups also pointed out that incompatible expectations about how and what to communicate rather than just the language barrier impeded their communication. "Language is more than just speaking the words, it's the culture, it's how words are said," said a teacher.

Some teachers stated they were able to break socio-linguistic barriers by making phone calls to the parents early in the year to introduce themselves, and to invite parents to contact them when they wanted to. One of them said she shared information about her own family with parents to encourage them to do the same. Another made herself visible in the community by playing basketball at the local park, which led to informal conversations and occasional outings with the parents. She said, "It's not really encouraged but it has not been discouraged either [by the school]."

Similarly, some parents were able to have their expectations met by teachers as a result of their individual initiative. A father reported that he persuaded his son's teacher to give him additional homework in English because he needed to learn it faster. Another stated:

I fought for the curriculum, fought for the teachers, fought for the time-table. I went to the school and argued my point, and that took a great deal of time . . . [my] child will not be taking the courses he does not need, but will take courses that make sense.

Discussion

The findings above show that immigrant parents and their children's teachers occupied different socio-cultural worlds that had shaped their values, beliefs, and practices. Their images of each other, role expectations, and patterns of communication illustrated the differences between them (Lim & Renshaw, 2001). Immigrant parents expected teachers to be like and act like teachers they had known in their countries of origin, while teachers thought immigrant parents should fit images of parents they had constructed on the basis of their own personal and professional experiences (Graue, 2005). Both groups readily characterized each other's group characteristics, distinguishing it from their own. This distinction was not simply a matter of different tastes in food or music, but deeply held beliefs about each other's roles as parent or teacher, which are ideologically driven (Brantlinger, 2003). These differences clearly influenced their relationship with each other, which, as many scholars remind us, is a crucial factor in children's success in schools (see Chang et al., 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gonzales & Moll, 2002). While the differences in their beliefs and practices regarding parenting and schooling were acknowledged by both parties, there was no expectation from either side that they could talk about these differences, discuss their implications for the children, and negotiate courses of action.

Reciprocal accommodations and negotiations are expected and sought when there are symmetrical power relations between the involved parties. In the contact zone of the school the relationship between immigrant parents—who are widely perceived to have deficits in social, economic and cultural capital— and their children's teachers is highly asymmetrical (Chen, 2003, Crozier 2000). Real and perceived disparities in the human and cultural capital of recent immigrants and Canadian-born teachers make it difficult for them to expect or work towards mutual accommodation.

Many immigrant parents stated that teachers considered them inferior because of their lower socio-economic status, lack of familiarity with English, inappropriate parenting styles, or inordinate ambitions for their children. Some of them also claimed teachers were prejudiced against them because of their race, culture, or religion. At the same time they said they were highly dependent on the teachers because information or encouragement provided or withheld by teachers could shape their children's futures. These perceptions could be partly a result of the decline in their personal circumstances upon their migration to Canada (see Picot, Hou, & Coulombe, 2007), and partly because of internalized colonial discourses, as post-colonial theorists have suggested (e.g., Hage, 2000; Loomba, 1998; Spivak, 1999). These self-perceptions, along with the lack of familiarity with the tools of discourse in the teachers' community of practice had silenced them (Crozier, 2000; Huss-Keeler, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), as also reported by the teachers.

Teachers' perceptions about immigrant parents, too, appear to have been shaped by historical and current imbalances of power and privilege. They stereotyped immigrant groups, limited their participation in schools to marginal tasks, wanted them to learn Canadian ways of parenting, and were frustrated with their passive resistance. The lens of deficits through which they viewed immigrant parents is also likely a product of colonial discourses (Loomba, 1998) and continuing neo-colonial relations between Western countries and their former colonies (Bhabha, 1994).

While the population of students in Toronto's schools, as well as in other large Canadian cities, has rapidly changed, their structures and cultures—designed for more homogenous populations—have been relatively slow to adapt to this change. The data show that a few teachers had taken extraordinary steps to try to connect with immigrant families, these were individual initiatives and not yet a part of the expected role of teachers in the school system. Similarly, immigrant parents' participation in academic decision-making were not a matter of routine but a result of some immigrant parents' persistence.

While schools had created mechanisms for immigrant parents to learn about their children's schooling and "Canadian ways of parenting," there were no corresponding opportunities for the teachers to learn about immigrant parents' parenting beliefs and practices, and expectations from their children's schools. Both immigrant parents and teachers agreed that the flow of information was unidirectional, and its form, timing, and content was controlled by teachers and school administrators.

Acknowledging historical and current injustices, which create asymmetrical relations among groups of people living in the same space, and building bridges across class, culture, and language is not easy. Some scholars (e.g., Graue, 2005) may argue that teachers expect to have asymmetrical relationships with all parents on the basis of their *expert* knowledge, but our data confirm findings from other studies that show differences in race, class, and culture deepen the chasm between the two (Brantlinger, 2003; Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1998; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Real and perceived differences between immigrant parents and their children's teachers in all these areas widen this gap. However, given that children of immigrants will make up an increasing proportion of the student population in our schools, and the mounting evidence that parent-teacher relations makes a crucial difference to their success in our schools, we cannot afford to ignore the distance between the two.

For teachers, initiating and sustaining such a dialogue is a matter of their professional ethic of care (Noddings, 1992). They already know that children's success in school requires a positive relationship between teachers and parents (Lawson, 2003; Englund et al., 2004). They also have to realize that they, and the immigrant parents whose children they teach, may have few implicitly shared bodies of knowledge, values, beliefs, and practices (Lave & Wenger, 1995; Lim & Renshaw, 2001). A caring response to the children they teach includes building up substantial knowledge of their lives outside of school. This cannot be done without learning about their parents' aspirations, resources, and strategies for supporting the children (Ali, Corson, & Frankel, 2009). Teachers will therefore have to initiate the common search for understanding, empathy, and appreciation (Noddings, 1992). This will be demanding work. It will also sometimes conflict with their own interests (Noddings, 1984) as it will require investment of time, and discomfiting critical reflection. However, this work is very much a part of teachers' commitment to a moral ideal of self as a teacher, for as Noddings (2005) puts it, ". . . As teacher, I am, first, one-caring." (p. 176).

Participating in such a dialogue would not be easy for immigrant parents either. It would mean acknowledging and confronting their own feelings of inferiority and dependence, and biases against their children's teachers. It would also require them to invest time and energy in learning the structures and tools of discourse used in schools to negotiate their rights and responsibilities. As they are likely to be already under stress looking for jobs, housing, and friends, this will be an additional challenge. However, given that their children's success in schools crucially depends on their relationships with their teachers, this is a worthwhile investment.

Conclusion

To develop mutual understanding between immigrant parents and their children's teachers, teachers (including school administrators) need to take the lead in creating structures and cultures that encourage parents and teachers to engage with each other on a sustained basis, in informal as well as formal settings. The purpose of these interactions would be to create a community by getting to know each other in reciprocally respectful ways.

Mutually respectful and genuinely cooperative relationships between teachers and immigrant parents can be built by (a) acknowledging historical and current societal injustices that have affected groups people identify with, (b) discussing each group's current values, practices, beliefs, and habits of mind (Lim & Renshaw, 2001), (c) sharing personal narratives that shape individual perspectives and actions, and (d) negotiating ways of working together to achieve common goals. This would require an ongoing dialogue built into the culture and structure of schools that are inhabited by children of immigrants.

In formal settings, schools could organize workshops where both teachers and parents identify, examine, and challenge their assumptions about each other and their reasons for these assumptions. Locating these feelings in the historical antecedents of colonization and current global power imbalance would help them understand the reasons for why they feel the way they do. This will have an emancipatory effect and re-orient both groups towards the future.

In informal settings, they could exchange stories of their life's journeys, or news about people or events that are important to them. They could undertake collaborative projects which do not require either to be an expert. They could gift each other with their time to build a relationship that lasts beyond the year in which a parent's child is in a teacher's class. This work should be recognized as an integral and ongoing part of teachers' work, not an additional or occasional responsibility.

Immigrant parents and their children's teachers could move forward by identifying specific content and forms of communication that are both desirable and feasible, which could help them strengthen their relationship. This exchange would help them listen to each other with receptive attention, question institutional traditions that have distanced them from each other, plan new ways of communicating, and share the responsibility of doing so.

Children of immigrants need a community of parents and teachers who support their education and integration in Canadian society. Teachers should take the lead in this matter by demonstrating the ethics of care towards them and their parents, thus also providing a moral ideal for the children they teach (Noddings, 2002). Immigrant parents should respond by making relationships with their children's teachers a high priority. Building a diverse yet caring society will take time, effort, and commitment but it is critically important to make this investment in Canada's future.

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Appendix

Guidelines for parents' focus group

1. Introductions. How many children do you have and what are their grade levels?
2. Please describe your relationship with your children's teachers. Probes: Expectations and surprises, critical incidents, early experiences & subsequent developments, nature and frequency of communications, etc.
3. What are some reasons for the above (e.g., expectations, incidents, etc.)
4. Are there differences in your relationships with your children's elementary, middle, and high school teachers? Of what kind, and why?

Guidelines for teachers' focus group

1. Introductions. What grades, subjects, or special programs (e.g., ESL) do you teach? And/or what administrative responsibilities do you have in the school?
2. Please describe your experiences in developing relationships with immigrant parents of children you work with. Probes: Expectations and surprises, critical incidents, early experiences & subsequent developments, nature and frequency of communications, etc.
3. What are some reasons for the above (e.g., expectations, incidents, etc.)
4. How do you see your role/s as their children's teacher? What are some reasons for the role/s you take?