

1. INTRODUCTION

Antoinette Gagné: Professor OISE/UT: Hello, my name is Antoinette Gagné and I'm a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education I'm also the coordinator of the ESL Infusion Initiative and the lead researcher on a project funded by Canadian Heritage investigating how to build relationships between immigrant families and schools.

Ranya Khan: Doctoral Student OISE/UT: Hello, I'm Ranya Khan. I'm a doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. I'm specializing in second language education and comparative international development education. I'm a researcher on this project.

Sameena Eidoo: Doctoral Student OISE/UT: Hello, I'm Sameena Eidoo, I'm a doctoral candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education specializing in curriculum and comparative international development education. I'm a project coordinator on this project.

Why Build Relationships Between the School and the Immigrant Family?

Antoinette Gagné: Involving families in their child's education is considered essential for successful schooling. Family involvement initiatives can be demanding for both schools and families, yet the benefits of successful programs make such initiatives worthwhile. Research shows that when parents are involved in their child's schooling, the child's academic achievement improves, absenteeism is reduced, teacher efficacy improves, and children are more confident and better behaved. Successful family involvement programs provide the link between the home and school that's essential to the growth and development of children, and enables schools to work with families and communities towards a shared goal on behalf of learners.

What is family involvement?

Ranya Khan: Family involvement is not a clearly defined term and has many meanings depending on the context in which the involvement takes place. Although we sometimes use the term parent, this term can extend beyond parents to include: grandparents; extended family members, such as aunts, uncles and siblings; as well as foster parents and other legal guardians. Family involvement is essentially a collaborative partnership between the family, the school and the community that focuses on supporting a child's academic, social, emotional and cognitive development. Family involvement activities include: families supporting their child's education by providing a home environment that is conducive to learning; families and schools communicating about school programs and curricula; family members volunteering in the child's classroom; families advocating on behalf of their children; and schools seeking family input and insight on curriculum changes and community initiatives.

What challenges do immigrant families face in becoming involved in a child's education?

Sameena Eidoo: Not all types of involvement lead directly or quickly to achievement gains for students and not all types of involvement are feasible or possible for all parents, particularly for newcomer, immigrant or refugee parents who are not able to participate in all activities so soon

after their arrival to a new environment and may be unaware as to how to develop a relationship with their child's schools. Schools and teachers need to have clear and realistic expectations of the level of involvement that different parents are able to engage in and recognize time constraints and resources that are at the parent's disposal. The ethnocultural, religious and linguistic diversity found in Canada and in particular in a city such as Toronto, presents a unique situation for schools to present educational practices, policies and programs that meet the needs of their diverse learners. In a city such as Toronto, approximately 43% of the city's residents are either immigrants or refugees, yet despite having a large foreign born population, immigrant and refugee parents continue to face significant barriers in communicating with their children's schools and advocating for their education. These barriers often include parents low proficiency in the school language, the incompatibility of their culture with the dominant culture of the school, as well as social class differences and the financial constraints often associated the newcomer experiences. Schools may be unsure as to how they can accommodate and respond to the diversity of their students and families, and how to ensure that all students receive an education that meets their needs.

What is this video project all about?

Antoinette Gagné: To gain insight into the communication barriers that exist between Ontario schools and immigrant and refugee families. A team of researchers funded by Canadian Heritage conducted a series of focus group interviews to examine the relationship between the immigrant and refugee families in Toronto and Toronto teachers, principals and settlement workers who work with these communities. This video series describes the experiences of families from selected immigrant and refugee communities, including: the Mandarin Speaking Community; the Russian Speaking Community; the Somali Speaking Community; the Urdu Speaking Community; the Arabic Speaking Community; and the Caribbean Community. These groups were chosen because they have been identified as low-voice immigrant communities. Low-voice immigrant communities refers to communities in Toronto that have fewer institutional structures, have a greater need, and are made up of more recent arrivals.

Ranya Khan: The video provides a group of parents with the opportunity to share their experiences and insights on the Canadian education system and provides teachers and principals who work with children from these low-voice communities the opportunity to share their experiences and ideas. This video was created with the hope that it would promote cross cultural understanding between immigrant and refugees families in the schools, encourage greater interaction between families and schools, and influence the development of programs, policies and practices based on the information learned from parents and schools.

Sameena Eidoo: This video is divided into 6 sections: Language; Cultural Understanding; Communication; Relationship Building; The Role of Schools and Families; and Information for Families and Caregivers. Each section will provide insight into the experiences, views and issues that are unique to the various low-voice immigrant and refugee communities featured in this series. Each section will also provide information as to how schools and communities can work together to remove the barriers that hinder education and promote inclusive practices that encourage families to become involved in their child's education.

Antoinette Gagne: This video series will not provide generalizations or universal truths about issues related to all immigrant and refugee parents and their children. It merely represents the opinions, beliefs and actions of the individuals consulted in this specific case. However, the needs, circumstances, experiences and responses that are found in this context might occur in other situations where familiar conditions are present.