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Facilitating Positive Development in Immigrant Youth

The Role of Mentors and Community Organizations

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Today, one in five children in the United States is a child of immigrants; by 2040, it is projected that one in three will be the child of an immigrant (Rong & Preissle, 1998). These youth bring with them remarkable strengths—strong family ties, a deep-seated belief in education, and optimism about the future. However, their journey presents a number of challenges. Many are settling in highly segregated neighborhoods of deep poverty (Orfield & Yun, 1999). Immigrant parents often must work long hours, leaving their children relatively unsupervised. The family system is placed under stress by the social and

can be a source of explicit information about the rules of engagement in the new society. They may also serve as a valuable source of emotional support, acting as attachment figures in a new context where youth are often socially isolated. The guidance provided by volunteer mentors or adult staff members at community youth organizations represents an important resource to foster the healthy development of immigrant children.

As noted in the introduction to this volume, such external support systems can be essential to families and to youth development (Perkins & Borden, 2003, this volume). Research on nonparental adult support figures interacting with youth through volunteer mentoring programs, community sports programs, or neighborhood activity centers indicates that these relationships can contribute to positive outcomes for youth by improving academic performance, behavior, socioemotional development, and family relationships (Freedman, 1993; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995). In the present chapter, we examine the contributions made by mentors and community youth workers to the lives of immigrant children and adolescents. We do this by first exploring several different sorts of challenges faced by many immigrant youth, which make their experiences with mentors and community youth workers particularly salient to their development. We then examine the processes involved in mentoring and in participating in community youth programs that have the potential to positively influence youth development. Finally, we discuss implications for policy concerning mentoring, community youth programs, and the healthy development of immigrant adolescents.

❖ STRESS RELATED TO EXCLUSION

Immigrants typically face a number of institutional barriers to acceptance and inclusion in the culture and the economy of the nation. In recent years, widespread concern about the influx of new immigrants has led to several anti-immigrant initiatives designed to prevent immigrants from receiving benefits or public services (Suárez-Orozco, 1998). These practices generate a pattern of intense exclusion and segregation among large numbers of immigrants and the larger society in several contexts, including the workforce (Smith, Tarallo, & Kagiwada, 1991; Waldinger & Bozogmehr, 1996), schools (Orfield, Chew, et al., 1999;

decline on emigrating. New arrivals typically settle first in highly segregated areas of deep poverty (Orfield & Yun, 1999), either in urban contexts or in rural farming communities.

Poverty has long been recognized as a significant risk factor for children (Luthar, 1999; Weissbourd, 1996). Children raised in circumstances of socioeconomic deprivation are vulnerable to an array of psychiatric distress including difficulties concentrating and sleeping, anxiety, and depression as well as a heightened propensity for delinquency and violence (Luthar, 1999). Those living in poverty often experience greater major life events stress as well as the stress of daily hassles (Luthar, 1999). Poverty frequently coexists with a variety of other risk factors that augment the risks of poverty alone, such as single parenthood, residence in neighborhoods plagued with violence, gang activity, and drug trade as well as school environments that are segregated, overcrowded, and poorly funded (Luthar, 1999). However, research has demonstrated that these circumstances can be significantly attenuated by parental supervision in the context of a warm parent-child relationship as well as by the social support provided by extended kin, interested teachers, involved community members, and mentors (Luthar 1999; Rutter, 1900; Weissbourd 1996; Zhou, Adefuin, Chung, & Roach, 2000).

❖ SEPARATIONS AND CULTURAL DISLOCATIONS

In addition to the trauma associated with growing up in an atmosphere of pervasive poverty and racism, there are several challenges unique to the immigrant experience that affect the nuclear family unit and the development of youth. Migrations often result in family members being separated from one another for extended periods as individuals are brought across borders separately. In a study of 400 immigrant youth from five regions, it was found that 80% had been separated from their parents for between several months and several years (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001).[2] Children may be sent to live with relatives in the United States, or parents may emigrate ahead of their children to establish a home before the arrival of the entire family. Extended family systems in both countries are usually involved in these migrations and may provide interim care and support for youth whose parents are not available. However, these transitions can be unsettling and disturbing, because youth grow up without their

The children's more rapid acculturation can lead to a disconnection between the generations (Sluzki, 1979; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Children may learn English more quickly than their parents, simultaneously losing fluency in their native languages, resulting in a diminishing effectiveness of communication between parents and children and an interruption in the traditional balance of power and authority in the family because children must act as interpreters for their parents (Silka & Tip, 1994; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Children's increasing familiarity with American cultural norms and adolescents' interest in American music, movies, and other cultural artifacts may alienate parents from their experiences, just as parents' adherence to the language and culture of the country of origin may embarrass adolescents. These changes may result in a mutual disappointment and disconnection between parents and children. In addition, youth and adolescents attending middle school and high school may be approaching a level of formal education that surpasses that achieved by their parents, rendering parents less able to help with schoolwork and perhaps even more uncomfortable with monitoring their children's academic progress. These developments contribute to a premature individuation of children and adolescents from their parents, in a world that demands more difficult choices than they may be capable of making without adult guidance.

❖ IDENTITY FORMATION

Psychologists agree that the central developmental task of adolescence is the formation of an integrated identity or sense of self (Erikson, 1980). During this stage, adolescents advance cognitively, developing skills that will allow them to formulate a more complex understanding of themselves and their relationships with others (Selman et al., 1992). They use these new skills to renegotiate their parental relationships to cultivate relationships with peers and other nonfamily individuals from whom they will learn about beliefs and values that differ from those with which they were raised (Hamilton & Darling, 1989). Through the lenses provided by each new relationship, an adolescent begins to make sense of his or her place in the world and to formulate an identity. This task is challenging and often painful, as adolescents simultaneously need independence from their parents and increasing amounts of nurturing and guidance (Allen, Aber, & Leadbeater, 1990).

majority culture is strong and may be associated with several negative outcomes, including risk-taking behaviors (such as substance abuse and unprotected sex), academic disengagement, and delinquency (Bankston & Zhou, 1995a; Bankston & Zhou, 1997b; Chen, Unger, Cruz, & Johnson, 1999; Ogbu, 1978). Counterintuitively, acculturation seems to be associated with declining health and poorer academic performance among immigrants (Hernandez & Charney, 1998). Although exposure to English improves performance on standardized test scores, grades, time spent doing homework, educational aspirations, and the importance of family decreases with the amount of time spent in the United States (Rumbaut, 1997; Steinberg, 1996).

In some cases, immigrant youth embrace total assimilation and complete identification with American culture. Other immigrant youth develop an adversarial stance toward the mainstream culture, not unlike their poor inner-city peers who hold little hope for the future (Ogbu, 1978). These children construct identities around rejecting—after having been rejected by—the institutions of the dominant culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Ogbu, 1978).

Yet other youth forge a bicultural (or multicultural) identity. A growing body of literature suggests that crafting an identity incorporating elements of both cultures may be the most adaptive strategy for immigrant youth (Bankston & Zhou, 1995b; Camino, 1994; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). These youth must creatively fuse aspects of both cultures—the parental tradition and the new culture—in a process of transculturation. They achieve bicultural and bilingual competencies that become an integral part of their sense of self. The culturally constructed social structures and the authority of their immigrant parents and elders are seen as legitimate, whereas learning standard English and doing well in school are viewed as competencies that do not compromise their sense of who they are. Youth who successfully develop bicultural identities easily communicate and make friends with their own ethnic groups as well as with students and teachers from other backgrounds. However, the development of a bicultural identity is challenging. Since so much of the process of adolescents' identity development depends on the definition of self through relationships with others, immigrant youth must experience relationships with older peers or adults who have successfully integrated two cultures into one identity, and who support this endeavor in members of the next generation. In addition, they must face the frustration and disappointment that their parents may experience as they perceive their

than supplanting the role of parents who have somehow failed to live up to their responsibilities, nonparental adults should instead be seen as supporting parents' efforts, as the entire family attempts the difficult task of adapting to life in a new and often hostile country.

There are many examples of programs and individuals working in immigrant communities that foster healthy youth development. These may take the form of volunteer mentoring programs, which provide youth with intensive one-on-one relationships with caring adults, or community-based youth organizations, which provide structured activities and settings in which to interact with peers while under the supervision of adult staff. These organizations represent an important form of social capital at work in immigrant communities, as they represent "the investment that individuals create through involvement in social relationships" (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995, p. 581). Several theorists, beginning with Coleman (1988), have indicated that the presence of resources—in a family, a school or agency, a neighborhood, or even an entire society—engenders positive interactions between individuals and contributes to positive outcomes (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Stevenson, 1998). Youth-serving organizations and individuals, much like ethnic-owned businesses and family networks, enrich immigrant communities and foster healthy development among its youth through the support they provide to parents and families (Nevarez-La Torre, 1997). The key element of both types of programs, from the perspective of meeting the developmental needs of immigrant youth, is the potential for forming caring, meaningful relationships with adults.

Mentoring

Volunteer mentoring programs have gained considerable attention in recent years. An estimated 5 million American youth are involved in school- and community-based volunteer mentoring programs, ranging from the prototypic Big Brothers Big Sisters program to other, less structured organizations. Many of these mentoring programs represent a recent development in youth-service interventions, with nearly half of the active mentoring programs in the United States having been established between 1994 and 1999 and only 18% having been in operation for more than 15 years (Rhodes, 2002).

Although there is wide variation among the services provided by mentoring programs, mentoring is generally defined as a one-on-one relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an

adolescent negotiates developmental transitions. If the mentor is of the same ethnic background as the protégé, he or she can interpret the rules of engagement of the new culture to parents and thus help to attenuate cultural rigidities. Furthermore, bicultural mentors can serve as role models in the challenging process of developing a bicultural identity, exemplifying the ways in which elements of the ethnic identity can be preserved and celebrated even as features of the more mainstream culture of the United States are incorporated into young people's lives. Many of the youth who are served by mentoring programs are immigrants or the children of immigrants, and many community programs that provide human services to specific segments of the immigrant population include mentoring for youth as one of their services.

Although numerous benefits are associated with mentoring for the development of immigrant youth, mentoring may not be ideally suited to the needs of some immigrant adolescents. First, an intense one-on-one relationship with another adult may represent a source of discomfort for some immigrant parents, who may feel threatened by the prospect of a nonrelative adult usurping parental authority or be mistrustful of the intentions of a nonfamilial adult who will be learning intimate family information through his or her relationship with a child (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Second, many of the volunteers who come into adolescents' lives are from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds than the youth they are mentoring. In the Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring program, for example, the waiting lists for minority youth requiring a mentor of the same race can be much longer than for those willing to be paired with mentors from the majority culture (Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman, & Lee, in press). Although same-race mentoring matches have not been clearly shown to be superior to cross-race matches (Rhodes et al., in press), these differences can have implications for immigrant youth, who may face language barriers if matched with a mentor who only speaks English and who may not receive needed support in the formation of a bicultural identity from a mentor who identifies too closely with the mainstream culture. Third, mentoring relationships are not suitable for all youth. Adolescents who are experiencing psychological, emotional, or behavioral distress may have difficulty engaging in a mentoring relationship, and older youth, as compared with younger children, may be more peer-oriented and less amenable to becoming invested in a relationship that requires spending significant amounts of time alone with an adult (Rhodes, 2002).

the positive attributes and strengths that children and adolescents possess, and it attempts to provide the support and encouragement needed for youth to achieve their goals and reach their potential. The youth development philosophy is embraced by many of the larger, national youth-serving agencies, but it has been adopted to differing degrees in smaller programs. Many of the programs that have been designed to target Latino and Caribbean youth, for example, are oriented on more of a deficit approach, seeking to prevent the onset of risky behaviors and negative outcomes such as adolescent pregnancy, substance use, or academic failure (Zhou et al., 2000). On the other hand, many of the programs that target Asian youth are of a more proactive nature, focusing on the development of academic skills and the provision of information regarding college admissions (Zhou et al., 2000).[3] In community agencies oriented on a youth development approach, adult volunteers and staff members typically espouse many of the qualities enumerated by Yohalem (2003, this volume) in her description of effective youth workers, as well as many of the qualities of successful volunteer mentors. These include an understanding of the adolescent's family dynamics and an ability to work with both youth and parents; the ability to create safe, collaborative spaces for learning and exploration in which youth take ownership and responsibility for their activities; a belief in youth potential; and an enthusiasm for and commitment to youth work (Baker, Pollack, & Kohn, 1995; Camino, 1994; Heath, 1994; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Scales, 1990).

Community organizations working with immigrant youth provide a broad array of services within the framework of youth development. The programs described below exemplify this spectrum.

Combining Mentoring and the Arts. Bajucol is a community organization that provides Colombian youth living in the Boston area with an opportunity to embrace their roots, culture, and folklore. Under the guidance of Colombian adults, a group of 25 youth meet twice weekly to practice Colombian folkloric dance, culminating in an annual performance to an audience of 1,000. Their practices and the elaborate preparations for their performances provide a focus in the lives of these youth. They develop a sense of connectedness with both adults and peers while focusing on an activity that fosters their ethnic pride. In addition, their mentors act as explicit guides to pathways of success and advocate with schools on behalf of the youth they serve.

themes as the transmission patterns of HIV among youth, the shame that keeps AIDS a hidden disease in the community, communication issues between parents and teenagers, differences in Haitian and U.S. cultural values, discrimination against people with AIDS, and the role that racial discrimination, homophobia, and gender inequalities play in increasing young adults' risks for the disease. Since 1989, over 200 Haitian teenagers have graduated from the program, and many have returned as adult advisors in HTCA and other community programs. Parents have become active members of the organization and advocate along with their children for HIV/AIDS prevention and compassion for people with AIDS. Through cross-generational dialogues and peer-led activities, HTCA has helped to change the view of HIV/AIDS in the Haitian community from a shameful, hidden disease to a problem that the community can mobilize to solve (Nicoleau, 2000).

Combining Mentoring and Academic Guidance. Puente in California has been acting as a bridge for Latino youth in making the transition from middle school to high school and then from high school to college. This highly successful program emphasizes several critical components. Fundamentally, an adult mentor is responsible for introducing to students academic opportunities that may not have been envisioned. Explicit and intensive instruction in the steps necessary to enter the college system is provided, as well as ways in which youth can be successful once they have entered the system. Students are also provided with instruction in writing and literature. Last, they are assigned a peer partner who acts as guide in the initial transition (Gandara, 1998).

At the most basic level, participation in a community youth program such as one of those described above translates into out-of-school time that is not spent unsupervised, in isolation, or on the streets with peers. These programs are often seen by participants as havens from the pressures of the streets or as second homes—places where youth feel comfortable expressing themselves and letting down their guard (Hirsch et al., 2000; Villarruel & Lerner, 1994). The existence of a setting in which youth can congregate, socialize, and participate in recreational activities during their out-of-school hours represents an important third option as they react to lack of supervision while parents are at work or are emotionally unavailable. Instead of having youth stay home to care for younger siblings or seek an alternate family structure in peer groups or street gangs, families can choose for their adolescents to attend a community center or club. This option allows youth to feel

at different times and for different purposes. Similarly, Cooper and colleagues (1999) expressed the difficulties inherent in Mexican immigrant children's transitions from elementary to middle school, describing ways in which community program staff can serve as "culture brokers" for youth. These culture brokers act as intermediary figures, able to bridge the often-considerable gaps between the norms in children's homes and those at school. Support from figures such as these youth workers increases the chances of academic success among Latino youth entering middle school and encountering numerous challenges to their newly forming bicultural identities.

Some researchers have characterized community youth centers as performing a bridging function, discussing the link these programs provide between two disparate cultures, that of the inner city and that of the mainstream population. All of the programs described above play this role for the families they serve. In addition, Heath (1994) characterized a youth program as a border zone between the streets and the mainstream culture. McLaughlin and colleagues (1994) described the adults working in the "urban sanctuaries" they evaluated as providing bridges between the inner city and the outside world of mainstream employment. Schinke, Orlandi, and Cole (1992), in an evaluation of Boys and Girls Clubs located in housing projects, found that the presence of a Boys or Girls Club was associated with lower drug and delinquency problems and more effective communication patterns among residents, police, housing authority management personnel, and community groups.

An 18-year-old Colombian youth expressed how a community organization working with Colombian immigrant youth helped him navigate his adolescence shortly after migrating:

> Before I began participating in Bajucol, . . . I was not active. I spent most of my time in my apartment, watching TV and not doing much. I suspect I would still be like that without the group. . . . A good friend of mine had been involved in the group and she told me about it. At the beginning, I had a wait-and-see attitude. I did not know how to dance; I had no idea about folk dancing. Slowly, it grabbed me. . . .
>
> For our group, the folkloric dance is the most important thing. We practice a great deal—we do it to represent . . . Colombia's positive traditions. Colombia is going through a difficult time. There are many stereotypes about our land. Our purpose is to put

and by parents' frequent absence and inability to provide guidance in dealing with the complexities of growing up in transcultural contexts. The support of a mentor or community youth worker can prove invaluable to many immigrant youth and their families dealing with these issues. Nonparental adults can ease the difficult transitions that immigrant youth face in several ways. They can reduce stress by forming a caring, supportive relationship with youth, by providing adult guidance and supervision when parents are unable to do so, and by serving as lenses through which to see the possibility of a healthy, transcultural adult identity. Of course, mentors and youth workers cannot be seen as the entire solution to the complex constellation of challenges encountered by immigrant families. However, their efforts can provide much-needed support to adolescents and, in turn, their families, contributing to healthy development.

Understanding the issues that affect immigrant youth development can inform the design of mentoring and community youth service programs seeking to make a difference in these populations. Some adolescents' experiences may leave them better suited for participation in a mentoring program. Such youth may be hesitant to approach adults in group settings or have family histories and situations that give rise to the need for more intensive one-on-one relationships. Other youth, by virtue of their developmental needs and family preferences, may be more effectively served by a community youth program. Attention should be devoted to exploring the effects of adolescents' psychological, emotional, and behavioral well-being as well as any age-related preferences for spending time so that each youth can be referred to the type of program that may prove most meaningful for him or her.

In terms of mentoring programs, training for volunteer mentors and staff should be expanded to include elements of cultural sensitivity, particularly relating to the specific immigrant groups that have settled in a given community. There are great potential benefits of pairing an immigrant adolescent with a mentor of the same ethnic background, especially considering the guidance and role modeling that can be provided by such a mentor as an adolescent explores identity issues in multiple cultural contexts. Consequently, recruitment of volunteer mentors in communities with immigrant populations should target adults who are immigrants themselves or the descendants of immigrants. Careful screening of potential volunteers is a part of all reputable

❖ NOTES

1. For detailed exploration of the different issues faced by first- and second-generation youth, please see Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001).

2. The Harvard Immigration Project (directed by Carola Suárez-Orozco with Marcelo Suárez-Orozco) is following longitudinally 400 immigrant children (ages 9 to 14 at the beginning of the study) coming from five major regions (China, Central America, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico) to the Boston and San Francisco areas for 5 years. This is an interdisciplinary project using a variety of methods including structured student and parent interviews, ethnographic observations, projective and objective measures, reviews of school records, and teacher questionnaires and interviews. The project was made possible with funding provided by the National Science Foundation, the W. T. Grant Foundation, and the Spencer Foundation.

3. This distinction reflects the erroneous bias of by the majority culture toward perceiving all Latino youth as high risk, and Asian youth as the "model minority," destined to achieve academically (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Ogbu, 1978). In reality, although Latinos do suffer from dropout rates twice as high as those of black youth and four times as high as those of white youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999), Asian immigrant youth do not perform well in school uniformly across subgroups; their achievement is related to economic factors and levels of acculturation. In cases where Asian immigrant youth do outperform their white American-born peers, these accomplishments may take an emotional toll (Bankston & Zhou, 1997; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Toupin & Son, 1991). To promote achievement among youth from various ethnic groups, programs that focus on youth strengths and potential rather than concentrating on preventing specific negative outcomes have been found to be more successful (Roth et al., 1998).

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