

2. LANGUAGE

Antoinette Gagné: Every year the Toronto region welcomes half of all immigrants who arrive in Canada. As a city, we are home to the second highest population of immigrants worldwide, surpassing Sydney, and New York, and trailing only Miami. Nearly 44% of the GTA's population and 47% of the city of Toronto is foreign-born. These newcomers bring with them a vast array of languages and cultures that enrich our society, and create the very fabric of what our city's motto is today: "Diversity, our strength." Of the 1.8 million immigrants who arrived during the 1990s, 17% were school children aged between 5 and 16. In the city of Toronto about 1 in 4 of all children aged 5 and 16 were immigrants who arrived in the 1990s. In Markham, Richmond Hill and Mississauga, newcomers make up about 1/5 of the school-aged population. Therefore, it seems natural that the most common barrier immigrants and their children face in regards to establishing themselves in Canada, is that of language and culture. These barriers carry through in all areas of a newcomers life, including that of school. However, it is well documented that in order for any child to succeed in school parental involvement is vital. As a result, teachers of immigrant children, as well as the newcomer parents themselves, no matter where they are from, find that language can become a challenge when it comes to parents taking part in the school system.

Somali Speaking Parent: When we were in Somalia and when we came to Canada, especially in the early days of our arrival the parents did not know the language there was a big barrier between them and the teachers. It might happen that the teacher wants to share some mistakes with you that your child has done, so you go to the teacher and you will not understand what the teacher wants to convey to you, or the child becomes the interpreter. So language barriers were the most difficult problems that we faced.

Somali Speaking Parent: When the teachers realized that the parent does not know their rights or do not have the ability to communicate with the teacher, some teachers used to take advantage of that situation. Not speaking the language does not mean that we are not educated. Even if you have the best idea in the world, but are not able to communicate, it is a problem. So I think communication barriers were the most difficult barriers.

Somali Speaking Parent: I believe that all immigrants suffer the same way, but we know our own problems, but other communities have also suffered the same as us. As some of us do not speak the language and other newcomers also do not speak the language and do not know the culture, so I feel that they also suffered the same as we did.

Somali Speaking Parent: When we came here we were not all at the same level - some of us knew different languages and cultures. Parents who were educated and could understand the teacher might establish a better relationship with the teacher, although that might not mean that they are better parents. If they are good parents who would like their children to get a good education and also would like to establish a good relationship with the teacher, they might not get the chance to establish a good relationship with the teacher because of a lack of language skills. Language is the key to establishing a relationship between the parents and teachers. If parents speak the language the relationship will be better; that parent can either write or can go

and talk to the teacher. If parents do not speak the same language, a problem happens in the school, the students come home with the problem and there is no one at home who will support or speak the language and could communicate with the teacher. So we will become victims. But parents who speak the language may establish better relationships because all parents are not bad and all teachers are not bad, but if we can't communicate there will be no good relationship established.

Urdu Speaking Parent: First, what they should do is to have some arrangement, because people with many languages come here from India they speak Hindi, from Pakistan it's Urdu, Somalia, Sri Lanka, people with many different languages come. So, to help them if they have interpreters, it will quickly resolve issues for both.

Educator : I think the biggest barrier is language, you know. And if you don't have someone in the school, like we're fairly fortunate here, but in some schools where there's nobody all day who can speak the same language as this parent, it must be awful for them, you know, even to ask a basic question. You know, I think that that must be the number one barrier for them, and maybe having more parent nights where you've got staff or an administrator and someone who speaks the language of the predominant group in your school, to have, you know, question and answer periods where if they have questions they can ask them, they can tell them a little bit about the school, about the board, give them the information in their own language. There's a tremendous cost every time we send out a newsletter because we get it translated into all different languages, but that, I mean, costs the school quite a bit to have that done every time, but it's really important. I think that that's the biggest barrier. I think that once you can communicate with them they're great.

Antoinette Gagne: Not only can teachers help in translating, but parents can as well. By using the resources we have in our communities schools can benefit from having bilingual parents act as language and cultural liasons by sharing their language abilities with other parents and educators. In addition, parents are made to feel welcome and are therefore able to build a role for themselves within the school community.

Arabic Speaking Parent: As a parent, well, in my opinion, language is the basis for communication and the basis for understanding among different societies. And language means allowing the other to listen to your opinions and reply or react to it. My personal opinion could be very modest, but in my opinion Canadian teachers are also multicultural, not only the families, but the teachers themselves are part of a family. So that is why I say that if a parent arrives and can't speak the language but at least definitely can say he is Arabic or Punjabi or Indian, then maybe inside the school if there isn't a teacher who could speak the language they should bring a translator or at least a volunteer. I myself put my name at the local school to translate for those who need it for all Arabs. Any newcomer, I would try as much as possible to translate what he wants to say.

Antoinette Gagne: One school has taken a unique approach to encourage the students themselves to inform their fellow students, parents and school staff about issues within the school in both English and their home language.

Educator: Could you talk about the newspaper?

Educator: We started it in one of our high schools and our idea was to cover with some discussion, topics, the big population of the Russian speaking community. Start from the school and then go and help their parents too, because it looks like 40% of school speak Russian but when we organize something like Russian group it was only 8 nice kids and all problem kids, I don't know, found other places to communicate and their own topics to discuss. So this is why we decided to start the newspaper in Russian and with translation each article in English. Then we had some other languages who decided to join our project, so it now looks like school newspaper, but it was initiated by Russian students, Russian-speaking students. We try to discuss school problems, youth problems, newcomer, new school problems, etc.

Antoinette Gagne: Parents and teachers can also make use of resources outside the school itself.

Educator: Every community has a different organizations involved that's a big help, because if we have a situation where we need a specific type of counsel for kids, we have people we just pick up the phone and they're right in. I think that's really important, and I also see the parents need counseling, you know it's there for them. They can come into the school and talk to a social worker or whatever.

Educator: I think that's another thing we do do, for interviews we do make sure that the parents are always offered an interpreter if they would like. And that works out very well for a lot of parents, you get a lot better communication and there's ways that we can't really help but an interpreter can, and I found that very helpful. Also on the phone, if the parents can't make it, you know they've got work and stuff.

Educator: I'll ask for social worker to come assist, or whatever it is, some other resources if I'm not able to deal with it on my own as a teacher or as a settlement worker. In some cases if there is no communication with the parent and there is a chance for reaching a reconciliation then by all means I will involve the parents. If maybe also proactively if I'm sensing that there is a gap in communication between parent and students, then maybe there is some sort of support that could be called for in place, before a crisis even happens between, because if there is really a blockage or discontinuation of communication then that's an environment which is very much suitable for a crisis that's going to happen sooner or later. So why not, sort of, deal with it before it happens and try to involve the parent in some, I don't know, maybe like there could be a community partner that's offering some courses on the Canadian environment, maybe some English language courses, maybe some parenting courses or workshops, and working with the student at the same time.

Educator: I think that if two are not understanding each other, they'd be at a standstill, I think that it's important that all teachers know that there is somebody else in the school that can intervene or help or. So my recommendation would be that if you feel you're at a standstill and things aren't working, let's go somewhere we can get some help together and find out what to do. And then from that I would be looking at setting up some kind of a coaching, you know peer

coaching, peer mentoring system in a school for teachers that weren't comfortable with that kind of interaction.

Antoinette Gagne: Not only can schools offer teachers written materials about different languages and cultures but they can also offer students and parents a wide array of resources. One such way that has made a tremendous impact has been the use of dual-language books. Such resources can create a positive and welcoming environment for newcomer parents and their children. By viewing the first language as a resource rather than an impediment to learning.

Educator: When our resources we were very fortunate to have books that parents can share or that grandparents, because here in this school we have a lot of grandparents that are caregivers for the children, so they could go to the library and get books that are in both languages and they can read that book to that child, and it'll be in Mandarin or. Here we have some resources that are tapes that they could borrow and read with the children.

Educator: Books in our library have great selection and I think parents are so excited when they see that any they're books that we have, like Spot, which are very popular English books, but they have English on one side and a native language on the other. So we haven't had those books in a number of different languages. The kids feel excited, the parents feel excited, and it makes them feel that they're important and part of our life here, and we've had some groups that have come in recently and we haven't had enough books and they feel slighted because we don't have, for example our Turkish community has started to grow here, so they feel we should be buying more of the Turkish books, you know, look at all the Bengali books here or the Urdu books you have here. But it's important for them to feel that they're part of it and to invite them up to the library and we have these for your kids and for those ESL kids as well, that there's something that they can read and they can share at home and their friends can read as well.