



International Network for School Social Work

<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net

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Editor: Marion Huxtable

Helping the Newest New Yorkers and their Children Adjust to School Daniela Pozzaglia

As a trilingual school social worker, who has worked for over 25 years with families of special needs children, I have had countless opportunities to introduce new immigrants to the American public school system. I work in New York City, in the borough of Queens, where the NYC Comptroller's Office (2000) cited 138 languages were spoken in the homes and 46% of the population was born outside the United States. The Queens Chronicle (8/10/06) reported that in 2005, Asians made up 21% of Queens' population and Hispanics 26%. Documented or not, these immigrants are an important part of the New York City fabric.

School social workers throughout the world need to assist immigrants as they enter new homelands. Migration is evidenced throughout the world, as travel options shrink distances, global economies shift and wars as well as natural disasters make relocation necessary. These newly arrived populations benefit from education, information and advocacy, which school social workers, are uniquely placed to offer.

School social workers are often the first staff member who meets with immigrant families seeking to have their children attend school. We are somewhat like the "gate keepers" to explain what the school expectations are, and how, in the US, we value parental involvement in the children's education. We also process evaluations and help determine eligibility requirements for special services for the children. We liaise with various offices when there is a suspicion of child abuse or neglect. The various culturally acceptable ways of disciplining a child may significantly differ with ours. We need sensitivity to give careful, quiet explanations of these differences in laws and customs. When parental behavior is in conflict with American law, respectful education and offering alternative methods are the first techniques for the school social worker to attempt.

Gender roles and behaviors are also an area of possible discord. Many school social workers are females and in some cultures are less respected than males. In these circumstances, I team up with a male colleague (a native of Ghana) who will sit in on my meeting, and who will support my interventions when dealing with an immigrant father, uncle, brother who is not receptive to listening to an American female staff member.

My relationship with all levels of co-workers including paraprofessional staff, who are mostly immigrants, has many benefits. I can count at least 20 different languages among them and

when I need cultural information, not only do I research on-line, but I also ask my colleagues. Sometimes, I will ask them to interpret information I want to give the families. Another benefit of having positive working relationships with so many, I am invited to share in all sorts of cultural celebrations!

All children of these families can be enrolled in school without documentation of legal status. My own estimates of the families I work with are that 90% are not U.S. born or are first generation Americans. The NYC Department of Education affords immigrants the opportunity to enroll their children regardless of legal status in the US and affords the new immigrant many supports. It publishes important information booklets for families in several languages, including Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Russian, Spanish and Urdu.

For those eligible special needs students, the system can provide:

- Bilingual classes with dual language materials
- Bilingual 1:1 paraprofessionals
- English as a second language for emerging English language learners
- Special Education services
- Phone interpretation which can help translate 28 languages for school staff

An annual conference (with simultaneous interpretation) is offered that highlights how parents can foster high achievement in their children. School social workers were involved as presenters explaining a myriad of topics for a crowd of over 1000 participants last spring.

I, too, am an immigrant. My parents and I came from Italy on the transatlantic ocean liner the Cristoforo Colombo in 1958. I was armed with the English phrases of “thank you” and “please” when I entered kindergarten. I can still remember when in elementary school, the children were asked to bring in an empty coffee can and I brought in a Medaglia D’oro can of espresso coffee, which was a short, fat can, while all my classmates had tall, cylindrical cans. I don’t remember the project we did, but I remember feeling really different. I also recall when my mother met my undergraduate French professor and she wore her best white gloves! I was, again, “different” because 1978 America was not 1958 Italy, and mom’s gloves really stuck out from all the other “American” parents.



I was honored to present my paper on November 12 and 13, 2010 at a conference, organized by the faculty of Social Work and attended by over 200 participants, which was held at the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg, Canada. The theme of the gathering was “Strangers in New Homelands: Creating Home Away From Home”. The panelists were policy makers, practitioners, academics and workers from resettlement housing and worldwide refugee camps. It was a lively group, diverse in experience and focus.

Contact information: <mailto:DPozzag@schools.nyc.gov>

**The next “Strangers in New Homelands” conference is scheduled for:
November 3 and 4, 2011 at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg.
The theme is “Positioning the Rights of Immigrants and Refugees into the
Human Rights Agenda around the World”
Contact Dr. Michael Baffoe at baffoe@cc.umanitoba.ca for information.**