Children who live in immigrant families constitute an ever-growing number in our nation’s schools and communities. In a city which prides itself on cultural diversity, 14% of New York City’s student population in K-12 is considered English Language Learners, with the largest concentration (54%) in grades K-5 (New York City Department of Education, 2009-2010). Because these learners have unique academic demands, educators are always searching for methods to adapt and respond to the challenges they face. Similarly, researchers and policymakers engage in efforts to generate and disseminate quality data which inform such decisions.

During spring 2010, the Child & Family Policy Center at New York University convened a Forum meeting comprised of early childhood researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and foundation representatives. The aim of this meeting was to identify the core issues which immigrant children and families confront within the dynamic system of early childhood services of New York City. Our ultimate goal was to generate concrete, actionable solutions to the most prevalent challenges. In doing so, we strengthen programs and partnerships—one small step in the direction of effectively serving an increasingly more visible fraction of the New York City’s children.

What follows is a brief report of the topics addressed at this Forum on Children and Families, “Strengthening Educational Partnerships: Creative Solutions to Meet the Needs of Immigrant Families”. We present the central questions addressed by our keynote speakers, panelists and audience participants. Recommendations for immediate practice improvements and long-term policy considerations are provided.
Children of Immigrant Families In New York City Schools

Who are New York City’s children?¹ In New York City public elementary and middle schools, approximately 52% of students are considered children of immigrants. According to Conger (2010) and New York City Department of Education (2000-01), New York City is the home of various immigrants groups, with Caribbean communities making up the largest percentage of immigrant families in NYC (see fig.1). With such diversity in our City, these numbers become relevant when examining the distribution of immigrant groups within our public schools.

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<th>Characteristics of Native- and Foreign-born NYC Students, 2000-01</th>
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Table 1: New York City Department of Education, Elementary and Middle School students

There is an equal percentage of Hispanic, Black, and White children who are foreign-born and native-born (New York City Department of Education statistics, 2000-2001). Language use other than English within the home differs significantly between the two groups. Foreign-born children in our schools make up a larger percentage of English Language Learners (ELL’s) compared to their native-born counterparts (Table1).

According to NYC DOE, English Language Learners (ELL’s) are defined as “a student that comes from a home where a language other than English is spoken – scores below a state-designated level of proficiency on the Language Assessment Battery-Revised (LAB-R)” (Infante, 2010). NYC schools report that 14% of their student population is comprised of ELL’s, where 41% of these students report speaking a language other than English at home. The majority of the students in our public schools (Pre-K through 12) speak Spanish (N=66%). However, more recently immigrant groups speaking languages other than Spanish are enrolling in the city schools, creating new challenges for disseminating information. This context creates opportunities for conversations between early childhood service providers and elementary schools to address the varied needs and challenges in a city with such rich diversity. Additionally, our young children enter early childhood programs and schools with a wealth of knowledge and cultural diversity which creates a unique exchange of information between families and schools.

¹ The census data reported here are the most recent available.
The Lives of Children from Immigrant Families: Unique Challenges

Children from immigrant families, or child immigrants, face unique challenges that influence their daily living and capacity to engage in the learning process. Research suggests that there are several dominant themes that represent what children and their families experience as part of their adjustment to American culture: family separation, mixed status families, and mobility/deportations (Dreby, 2010a,b; Fortuny, Hernandez, & Chaudry, 2010). By understanding the complex nature of children's lives, we are better able to effectively address their educational needs.

Family separation disproportionately affects immigrant families from Mexican and Central American countries (Dreby, 2010b). When families face separation, this can cause a lot of stress, uncertainty, and resentment between children and parents. Research suggests that family separation can be harmful to children's educational trajectory. Children "left behind" by migrant parents perform more poorly in school than their peers on many factors (Giorguli, 2004; Heymann et al., 2009; Kandel & Kao, 2000).

Issues of mobility and deportation are common in immigrant communities. The lack of stability in the U.S.—often due to economic position or work conditions—lead to negative consequences for families and children (Chaudry et al., 2010).

Children in immigrant families are nearly twice as likely to have poor health, live in overcrowded housing, and live in poverty as compared to children of non-immigrants (Dinan, 2006; Reardon-Anderson, Capps, & Fix, 2002; Shetterly, 1996; The Urban Institute, 2006). In 2004, 61 percent of children of immigrants lived in families in which one or both parents lacked a legal status (Urban Institute, 2006). Children who live in such households take on new roles to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the family. They are used as family translators and cultural brokers (tutors, advocates, and surrogate parents). When children take on such critical roles it can create tensions in the educational environment for these families. In a recent study, for example, mixed-status household parents struggle to monitor children's schooling thus leading parents to feel insecure about institutional interventions that schools have in place (Dreby, 2010a).

Meeting the Needs of Children from Immigrant Families

Through the work of the Forum, three areas were identified as meaningful contexts where supports to children and immigrant families can improve: 1) Parent Engagement/Involvement, 2) Transition from Pre-K to Elementary School, and 3) Integrative Early Childhood Services.

Strategies for Enhancing Parent Engagement

Parents play a critical role in supporting their children’s growth and development. Specifically, family engagement in the early years is essential for laying the foundation that promotes a child’s learning and later school success (Bredekamp, 1997). Yet, many immigrant families may not know how to help their children at home or in school—or may not perceive this role as “appropriate” and best reserved for the “professional teacher”. Often immigrant parents do not speak English and may feel disconnected from the school environment (Borba, 2009). Furthermore, the ways parents from diverse immigrant families do get involved may not coincide with the system’s expectations of involvement. Thus, in the diverse context of NYC schools, and related early childhood education programs, it is essential to define parent involvement or engagement in dynamic, culturally meaningful ways. Teachers, administrators and staff should engage in efforts to understand the culture of families in the school context and build rapport through ongoing communication.
Successful parent participation in the child’s learning process depends upon recognizing individual strengths, establishing positive parent-professional relationships, and providing support and resources for parents/families. With educative experiences and support, parents are more apt to become advocates and partners in their child’s education. Creating connections for parents between their natural interactions with their children (e.g., book reading, cooking activities) and what is happening in the classroom is a way to bridge the home-school connection. Increased linguistic and cultural sensitivity will also help to include all family members in the educational process. Because immigrant families rely on extended families for care-giving roles, supporting familial relationships will indirectly foster the child’s development.

**Policy recommendations for strengthening parent involvement in home, school and early childhood programs:**

**Home Strengths**
- Expand the meaning of parent involvement to include all family members (e.g., grandparents, siblings).
- Capitalize on resources of family members by sharing their native culture(s) (e.g., ethnic foods, cooking activities, language).
- Empower parents and families by providing resources and programs tailored to their needs (e.g., family literacy, citizenship classes, computer training).

**School Strengths**
- Provide a variety of opportunities for involvement at the school-level (e.g., workshops, home-based literacy activities, books).
- Provide a parent ‘facilitator’ or coordinator to establish procedures for ongoing communication between and among parents and professionals.
- Parent-to-parent communication (e.g., bilingual hotlines, phone trees)
- Written materials and information regarding community and school resources (e.g., newsletter, handbooks). Translate into native language
- Ensure the professional development of staff members to become culturally and linguistically sensitive to the individual needs of parents and families.
- Devise ways to interact positively with parents

**Research/Policy Initiatives**
- Integrate Department of Education services and programs with Community Based Organizations to ensure cohesion of services and funding.
- Utilize surveys within the schools and communities and gather information from parents about what is needed to support parent involvement.
- Provide equal resources across schools (e.g., translators, bilingual staff).
Transition from Pre-K to Elementary School: Best practice and strategies

Children enter kindergarten from a variety of preschool settings (e.g., Day Care, Head Start, Universal Pre-Kindergarten). Because the type and intensity of classroom supports, parent involvement, and student-teacher ratio differ between Pre-Kindergarten settings and early school (Shore, 1998). This transition can be difficult, especially for immigrant parents due to cultural and linguistic barriers. Some preschool programs provide lists of local elementary schools and encourage parents to visit their feeder school at the end of the school year. By contrast, parents may be engaged in more collaborative, system supported efforts which empower and engage families in the transition process. One way to do this is by aligning professional development and curricula across early childhood programs and elementary schools, and through community coordination. Parents receive information about how the pre-school experience translates to the elementary curriculum and expectations.

The literature on ‘transition’ suggests that schools must provide continuity and connections across contexts (Pianta & Cox, 1999). The variability in this transitional process leads to very different familial engagement in the schooling process (Education Commission of the States, 2000). In addition, programs need to recognize the dynamic relationships that exist between families, school staff, and community in the transition process. Because of the variability in transition policies, there is no one ‘best practice’. However, we can draw from some promising programs to inform good practice for this important change.

Promising programs:

Supporting Transitions from Early Education to Public School (STEPS) is a new program-to-policy initiative across five early childhood centers and three public elementary schools in the South Bronx where a large percentage of third grade students scored low on proficiency exams. The four components of the project include: Align professional development across early childhood and public school; empower and engage families; improve community coordination; and create system-wide reform. The goal of the project is to provide continuity across all levels in the quest to build and sustain children’s social, emotional, and academic growth.

Children’s Aid Society’s Community Schools Initiative has a component that engages children and families in three benchmark transitions. These include: transition from pregnancy to home visiting; transition from home visiting to preschool; and transition from preschool to kindergarten. Formal and informal meetings that include family, teachers, and staff; classroom visits to kindergarten; sharing assessments of early childhood teachers and special needs coordinator with kindergarten teachers ensures continuity during the process.

Policy recommendations for improving the transition from pre-kindergarten settings to elementary school:

School/Community Strengths

- Establish a school and program transition team and include an early childhood ‘coordinator’ at the district-level.
- Dissemination of information by CBO’s to clarify procedures for making successful transitions (e.g., literacy activities, registration information).

Research/Policy Initiatives

- Develop partnerships that include: school personnel (teachers, principals, superintendents); parents and children; preschool personnel (ed. directors, teachers); community groups.
- Collaboration and coordination between CBO’s, ACS, and DOE.
- Align curricula and professional development across programs serving children (0-8 years).
- Look to promising programs (e.g., local NYC Head Start Programs, Abbott Program, European model, Montgomery County Public Schools Model)

Creating integrative services to better support immigrant children and families

Building capacity and creating opportunities for positive growth in immigrant communities goes far beyond the educational context. To serve children and families effectively and increase the chances of sustained social, economic, and developmental improvement in their lives, an integrative services approach to early childhood...
advocacy creates the needed supports to address the dynamic, complex issues faced by immigrant families in this City. Some existing city-based organizations who model a comprehensive approach to early childhood services include:

University Settlement provides integrative services to meet the needs of immigrant families and advocates for those most in need. Services include housing assistance, health, mental health, adult education (e.g., English classes), and crisis intervention. Early intervention and childcare serve families with children (zero to five). The program also includes comprehensive professional development by experts in the field of early childhood education.

Children’s Aid Society’s Community School Approach provides comprehensive services sustained from birth to age five in two New York City full-service community schools. Support for families and children throughout the developmental continuum include: Doula services, home visiting, early childhood programs, and transition to kindergarten. The full-service community school aligns integrated services (social services, mental health team, school-based health clinic) and education to ensure the needs of children and families. An important focus of the program is “respecting the culture” of the many low-income Latino immigrants served by providing bilingual staff and building on parents' knowledge and experiences.

Abyssinian Development Corporation (Soukeyna Boye Spivey, 2010) serves immigrant families from a variety of backgrounds (West African, Middle Eastern, South American). Some families are refugees who have faced trauma and poverty in their native country. Strengthening the entire family in a caring, culturally sensitive environment helps them to succeed in a new country. The program offers a “hub” for supporting and empowering the immigrant population. Partnerships with universities, community leaders, and religious organizations provide support for family literacy, ESOL, and a variety of adult education courses to help parents gain confidence and new skills.

**Policy recommendations for supporting a seamless, integrative system of early childhood services for children and families:**

**Community/School Initiatives**
- Create community-based ‘hubs’ to triage needs of community members (e.g., family literacy, language learning programs).
- Offer a flexible schedule (e.g., Administration for Children and Families Community Partnership Initiative – CPI). CPI is an approach to rethink and reorient systems to develop a more integrative approach to family service delivery.
- Encourage grassroots models staffed with bilingual personnel and community advocates.

**Research/Policy Initiatives**
- Establish a centralized tracking system to align services with family needs.
- Conduct focus groups to assess family goals and needs.

**Advocacy/Practice Initiatives**
- Organize informal forums for outreach.

**Conclusion**

Children from immigrant families require unique and strong supports to succeed. By strengthening links between educational, community and social programs, we create a comprehensive and integrative approach to addressing the academic success and development of young immigrant children. The policy and practice recommendations offered in this brief serve as a first step in this direction.
References


The Institute for Education and Social Policy (2003). *Who are Our Students? A Statistical Portrait of Immigrant Students in New York City Elementary and Middle Schools*.

Forum Committee, Spring 2010

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Strengthening Educational Partnerships:

Creative Solutions to Meet the Needs of Immigrant Families

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