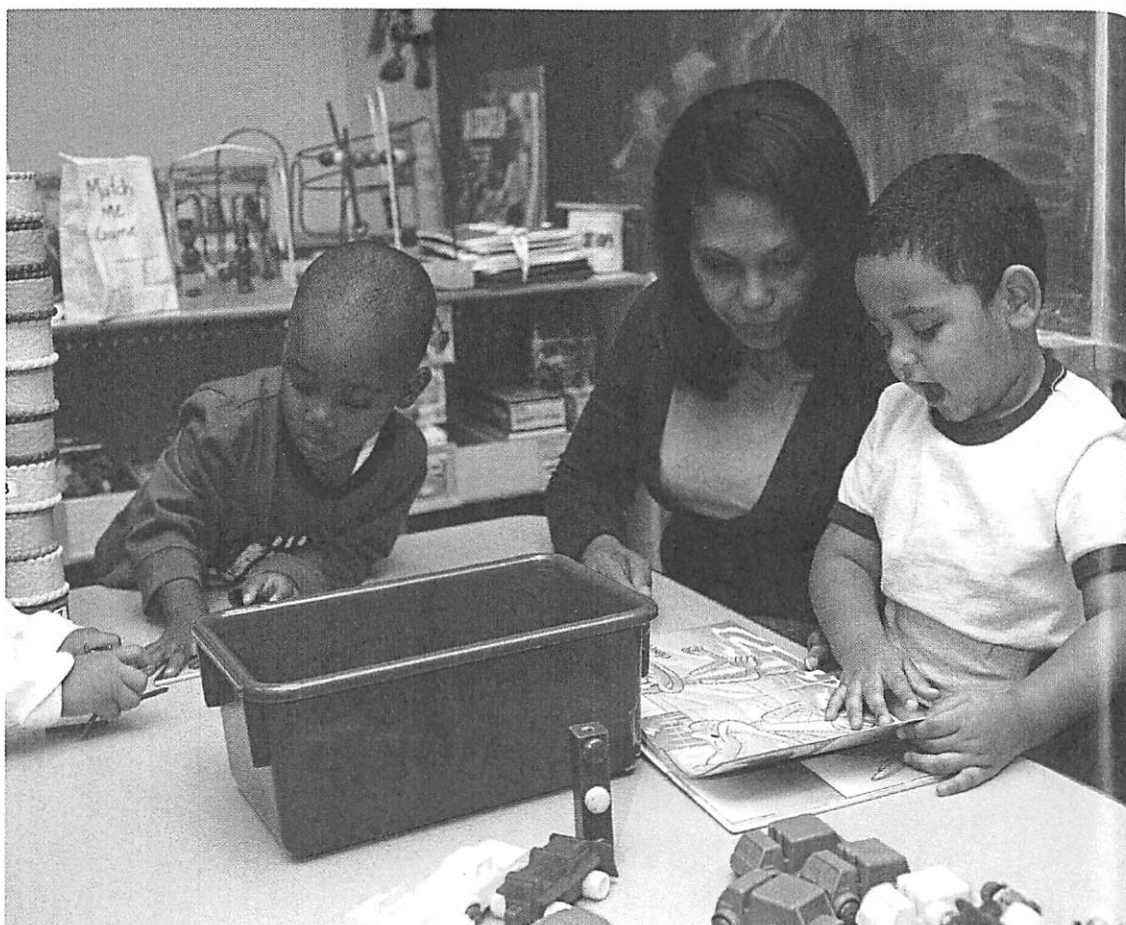


Engaging
Families:
Partnering in
Meaningful
Ways

Jennifer Keys
Adair and
Alejandra Barraza

Preschool



Voices of Immigrant Parents in Preschool Settings

WHEN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES enroll their children in US early education programs, it is often with a mix of hope and apprehension. Many immigrant parents are grateful for and feel optimistic about the education their children will receive. But some may worry that their children's teachers won't understand all aspects of their culture or will be unable to advocate for their children in the classroom. In the United States, as in other countries, these concerns can be connected to disparaging and discriminatory comments and attitudes circulating in the larger society about immigration and immigrants. In addition, some teachers have limited experience with or education about the immigrant communities they serve (Arzubiaga & Adair 2010).

Children Crossing Borders project

In extensive focus group interviews, more than 100 immigrant parents in five US cities, as part of the multisite ethnographic study Children Crossing Borders (CCB), shared their concerns and hopes about the characteristics of their children's teachers. The ideas, strategies, and concerns recorded from the interviews with immigrant parents demonstrate that these parents, like all parents, are important sources of information about their young children and their schooling. They can help teachers understand what it means to be a young immigrant family in the United States.

The CCB research team (which included one of the authors—Jennifer) interviewed parents who came from a variety of countries, including Mexico, Iraq, Egypt, Dominican Republic,

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Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria (Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair 2013). Because it is often difficult to ask parents, particularly immigrant parents, about sensitive subjects like parent-teacher relationships, immigration, and discrimination, researchers showed a video of a preschool to get people talking, instead of asking a list of interview questions. This research method is called *video-cued multivoice ethnography*, perhaps more commonly known as the Preschool in Three Cultures method developed by Joseph Tobin (1989; 2009) over the past 25 years.

We focus on how the immigrant parents in the CCB study reacted to the preschool practices they saw in the filmed classroom.

As part of the CCB study, immigrant parents and preschool teachers in five cities (Nuevo Campo and Phoenix, Arizona; Nashville, Tennessee; Riverdale, Iowa; and New York City) watched a 20-minute film showing a typical day in an NAEYC-accredited preschool in Phoenix. (Nuevo Campo and Riverdale are fictitious names to protect the privacy of participants from these small communities.) The program serves many children of immigrants, mostly from Spanish-speaking families. The film includes typical preschool scenes that most US preschool teachers would recognize, such as children arguing over a dress in the dramatic play area and clapping along with a song during group time. Also shown in the film are high-quality and perhaps less often seen preschool classroom features, such as Spanish-speaking teachers and signage in Spanish and English throughout the classroom. In the text that follows, we focus on how the immigrant parents in the CCB study reacted to the preschool practices they saw in the filmed classroom, telling us what they liked and didn't like, what was different from their own early childhood experiences, and whether the program looked like their children's classrooms.

Immigrant parents' suggestions for early childhood educators

The diverse groups of immigrant parents who watched and responded to the film had different ideas about children's learning, play, appropriate parent-child-teacher inter-

actions, and child guidance, but there were some commonalities among the parents' views of teacher qualities. The following are seven suggestions offered by numerous immigrant parents from multiple cultural, linguistic, and ethnic groups for teachers who work with young children of immigrants.

1. Be affectionate with children

One scene in the video caught the attention of most of the immigrant parents:

Michael, barely 4 years old, holds back sobs as he enters the classroom. While his mother signs him in, Michael clings to her leg. He sniffles, looking up periodically. When his mother takes him over to Liliana, the teacher, Michael lets out a wail. After the mother leaves, Liliana holds the sobbing child, cuddling him, talking softly to him, and congratulating him when he calms down.

When the parents watched this scene, many voiced sympathy for Michael and his mother. And they praised Liliana for the way she comforted the child and helped him feel better. Juana, a mother from Mexico, explained,

I liked the way the teacher hugged the little boy when he started crying after his mom left. She tried to comfort him right away. It is important for the teacher to try to make the student feel safe.

Juana, like many parents, used words like *hug*, *comfort*, *patience*, and *feeling safe* to describe how teachers should treat children in the classroom. Although parents in the study had a lot to say about learning, these were typically their first responses, rather than comments about curriculum or the classroom environment.

Suggestions

Immigrant parents said that when children have separation anxiety or cry, it is important for teachers to be affectionate with them. "Like a mom," said a mother in one of the New York City preschools. Explained a mother in Riverdale, "Affection makes the children feel wanted and welcomed. They are more apt to tell you if something is wrong if you are close to them." Teachers can mirror how parents show affection to their children and ask parents how best to comfort their children when they are sad, confused, frustrated, or tired. Immigrant parents voiced deep concern that their children might be suffering without the teacher noticing or

About the Authors

Jennifer Keys Adair, PhD, is an assistant professor of early childhood education at the University of Texas at Austin. She is coauthor of *Children Crossing Borders: Immigrant Parent and Teacher Perspectives on Preschool*, and has conducted studies with US immigrant communities and families. Jennifer is researching how to increase young children's agency at school in culturally responsive ways. More information about her research can be found at jenniferkeysadair.com. jadair@austin.utexas.edu

Alejandra Barraza is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work focuses on the role of administrators in early childhood settings that serve children of immigrants and their families. Alejandra is the principal of Carroll Early Childhood Center, a Head Start Center with the San Antonio Independent School District.

understanding why. Teachers can hug children to demonstrate that they are safe and cared for. When parents saw their own child's teacher hug children in the classroom, parents reported that this affection was a signal to them that their children would be watched over carefully.

2. Be patient with children

Immigrant parents worried about whether teachers were patient with young children of immigrants. Parents believed that language barriers, shyness, and new environments might prevent children from learning things as quickly as they might otherwise. During one interview in Nuevo Campo, when families were asked what advice they would give to teachers who work with young children of immigrants—especially to teachers who are not immigrants or don't speak the same language—this is what they said:

Consuela: First of all, [teachers] should be very patient with [immigrant children] because [the children] don't know the language. Because a child is very intelligent.

Inéz: To be patient with them, the ones arriving from Mexico. To speak some Spanish . . .

Consuela: Because it's the same as if you didn't know Spanish and you were going to Mexico. You would feel bad, wouldn't you, that they didn't understand you?

Elena: Not treating [children] bad because they are Mexicans.

Parents in our discussions shared experiences in grocery stores, banks, doctors' offices, and at the front desk of the school, where they felt ignored or hurried along because they didn't speak English or were from another country. Muslim immigrant parents in Phoenix shared stories of their children being taunted by classmates and community members after the events of September 11. Riverdale parents shared stories of missing out on important curriculum and program decisions for their children because they did not receive notices or could not read them in English. Asking for patience from preschool teachers may seem obvious to experienced early childhood educators, but this is especially important to immigrant parents, many of whom may experience a society that is impatient with them.

Suggestions

Many immigrant parents in our study, like Consuela, Elena, and Inéz, believe in their children's ability to learn. But they are realistic about their learning in English—it may take longer because English is often a new language for children of immigrants. It is important for teachers to willingly go over concepts, books, materials, and instructions multiple times and in a calm way. Immigrant parents spoke positively about teachers who work with children over and over and who “don't give up on children.” Parents thought it was important to help young children of immigrants learn English in a kind way, without pushing them too hard or



making them feel that they are far behind children whose home language is English.

3. Be respectful with parents

When teachers asked immigrant families watching the film of the Phoenix preschool their opinions about the teaching practices or the learning environment, the families found it difficult to be critical of the teacher. It seemed much easier for the parents to point out the *practices* they liked and didn't like. One father explained that Latino parents have huge respect for teachers and often address them as *maestra* rather than by name. Guadalupe Valdés (1996) writes that respect for the teacher has often been taken advantage of by school systems when it comes to Latino immigrant families.

At the preschools in Riverdale and Nashville, where parents and teachers rarely saw one another and operated in different cultural communities, preschool teachers made some inaccurate assumptions about immigrant parents' feelings regarding their children's education. For example, in Riverdale, preschool teachers reported that parents were appreciative of their children's education and seemed to be generally accepting of what happened at school. The parents told us they were grateful for their children's education but had questions about education issues they were hesitant to raise with the teachers or staff. Many parents were concerned about their ability to help with schoolwork or worried about whether their children would be ready for kindergarten or would stop speaking Spanish because there were no Spanish-speaking teachers.

In Iowa, Sudanese parents spoke about the cultural barriers between themselves and the school. One mother,

Fazilah, described an incident with her young daughter and the school's principal. Her daughter had explained that she was born in Africa and the principal corrected her and said she was born in the United States. Her daughter was upset, so Fazilah met with the principal to explain how her daughter views her complicated identity.

Suggestions

Schools and teachers that are respectful, according to immigrant parents in the study, work hard to support parents in their role as their children's first teachers. This means asking parents about their child, having translators at parent-teacher conferences, translating newsletters into home languages, and asking for input on the optimal early learning environments for their children. To establish respect for parents' cultures and experiences, teachers might ask parents whether the education they see in the classroom is similar to or different from what they remember in their home country. Ask whether there is anything they would like to see in the classroom or whether something seems to be missing. If parents are able to visit the classroom, teachers can point out everyday conflicts or occurrences and ask parents for their input about how such incidents would be handled at home.

If some families remain relatively quiet during conferences and visits, show them samples of their child's work to illustrate the child's progress. An interesting video clip

or photograph can show how their child acts in a social situation or works intently with different materials. Parents in the study had a lot to say when they watched their own children on camera. Many enjoyed learning more about what happens in school during the day. One of the teachers in the study commented that after parents watched the film, they had many comments and questions about classroom routines and curriculum.

4. Use or learn words in the home language

Parents in the study wanted their children to have bilingual teachers who could advocate for their children at school and within the larger community. They felt that monolingual teachers who attempted to speak some of their home language demonstrated support for bilingual families and respect for the immigrant community. Parents appreciated teachers who learned everyday phrases like "Hello, how are you?," "Thank you," and "Your child did well today."

Teachers who speak English and the same language as the immigrant parents are invaluable, not just for their language skills but often for their insight into how difficult it can be for a parent or a child to learn a new language and to understand new cultural rules. Immigrant parents felt that teachers who could speak the child's home language could use it to advocate for their child, intervene on the child's behalf, and communicate directly with parents. In Phoenix, one father wondered how a teacher could know a child

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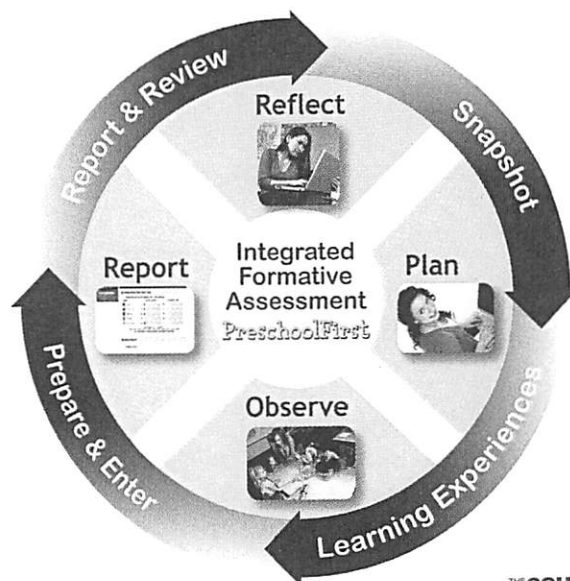
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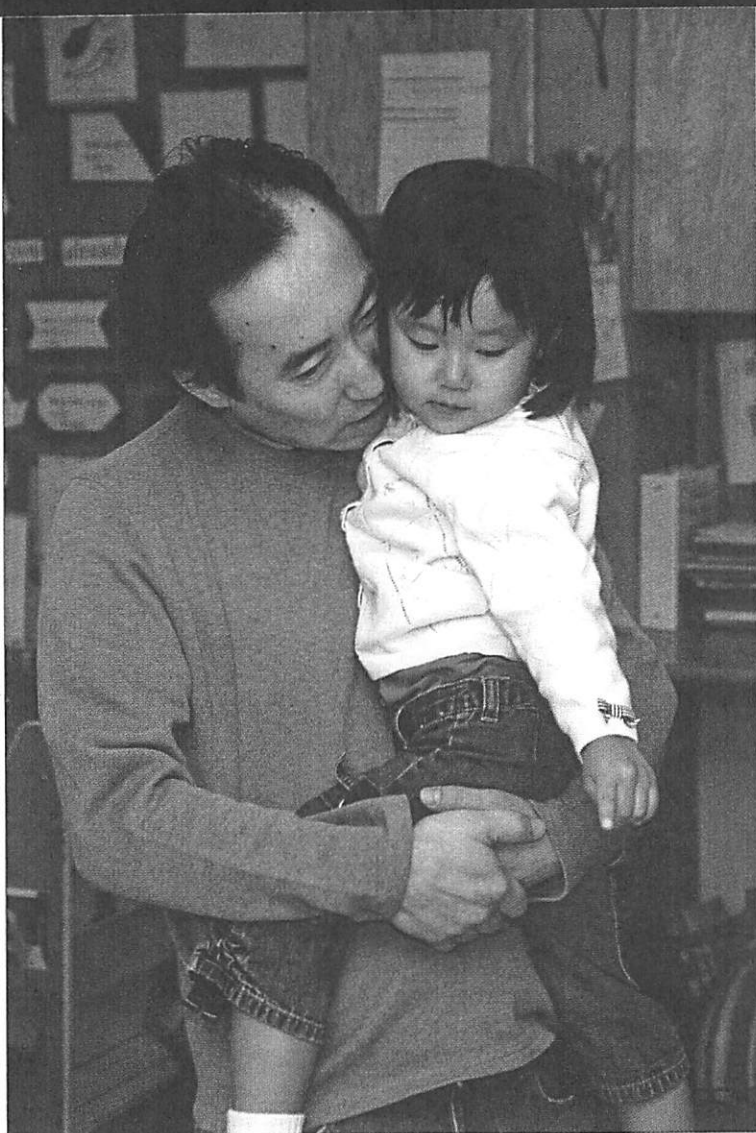
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was being teased or left out if she didn't understand the child's language. Parents told us that when their children had to translate for them at school conferences or meetings with teachers, it damaged the parent-teacher relationship because it made them feel more an immigrant and less a parent. Immigrant parents in all five cities agreed that for parents to participate in their children's educational experience, it is important and necessary for the school to provide translators.

Suggestions

Teachers can advocate for their schools to be responsible for appropriate translation, and they can actively seek volunteers and mentors from the immigrant communities of the families they serve. Early childhood teachers in New York organized a parent group so that immigrant parents from previous years, whose children had already left the preschool for elementary school, could mentor new parents at the preschool.

Teachers who do not speak the family's language can learn words and phrases from the children in their classroom, and use games and learning center activities that

teach or support words in the languages of the communities served in the classroom (Marinak, Strickland, & Keat 2010). Such learning is not going to result in teachers' fluency but it demonstrates support to families. Before a translator joins a conference or visit, immigrant families and preschool teachers can try to communicate directly. Attempts by families and teachers to learn some of each other's language is a step toward equalizing the relationship.

5. Approach parents as experts on their children

Immigrant parents often remarked that preschool teachers explained a lot about teaching strategies to them but rarely asked questions about their child. In New York City, immigrant parents from Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire pointed out that the teachers spent most of the home visit explaining academic instruction and what their responsibility was as parents. Immigrant parents in Riverdale and Phoenix agreed. Even parents who really liked their child's teacher were frustrated when the teacher explained school issues during meetings, rather than answering their questions or listening and responding to their concerns.

Suggestions

Immigrant parents, like most parents, may be hesitant at first to comment on teaching practices but are usually quick to share stories about their own children. During home visits and conferences, take time to ask the parents about their children to validate the parents' role as experts about their children. Ask them about their children's likes and dislikes, what they enjoy learning, how they learn best, what tricks they use for helping the children stay on task, and what they would do in certain situations and why. Questions are more effective if they are open-ended. Teachers do have routines, curriculum, and organizational issues to explain to parents, but asking questions and treating parents as experts helps them feel welcome at school and want to participate in their children's learning.

6. Learn about children before school begins

Some immigrant parents in the study suggested that teachers get to know children before they enter the classroom. To do this, teachers have to rely on the expertise of the parents, rather than on their own observations. Josephina wished that she could have explained her daughter's shyness to the teacher before the school year began.

My child is too shy . . . she barely talks. I want to tell the teacher that she is not sick . . . it doesn't mean that she doesn't want to play with other children but she has been like that all the time.

Josephina felt that if the teachers had known this beforehand, they would have watched out for her daughter more effectively on the playground and in the classroom. Perhaps, Josephina thought, they would have been more understanding of certain behaviors and helped her child socialize with different groups of children. She felt that in early educational settings it was important to know the *individuo* (individual), or the whole child.

Suggestions

It is important for teachers to welcome and encourage immigrant families to share their knowledge about their children. Parents can ask for a translator when communication is a struggle, especially to share their thoughts and ideas about their children before or at the beginning of the school year. Honest curiosity from teachers about children coming into the classroom enables families to share their knowledge about their children and establish a relationship with the school.

Gathering information about each child in a classroom could involve home visits, parent questionnaires, informational school meetings, parent-teacher conferences before school begins, parent visits or volunteer time to help with specific projects, meeting with new parents at the end of the previous school year, and asking parents to tell you

about some of their children's likes and dislikes on the first day of school. These ideas support many recent articles in *Young Children* that focus on asking questions and getting expertise on preschool-age children from parents and family members. (See Kersey & Masterson 2009 and Nagel & Wells 2009.)

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When teachers have little knowledge of or connection to immigrant communities surrounding their school, they can start through community participation, such as attending festivals and cultural events and getting to know different people. Teachers can eat at restaurants that serve authentic cultural dishes, support theaters and businesses in the immigrant communities, and work hard to develop positive relationships with parents of children attending the school. Specifically reaching out to parents from immigrant communities disconnected from teachers' own personal backgrounds can be the beginning of reciprocal relationships that benefit families, teachers, and children.

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7. Welcome parents to the classroom

Acknowledging families when they enter the classroom might seem obvious to experienced early childhood educators, but immigrant parents told us this was one of the main ways they felt welcomed into the preschool classroom. Immigrant parents want to feel that their presence in the classroom and at the school is welcome and appropriate. Greeting parents and spending time with them signals to parents that they can freely ask the teacher questions, share concerns, or observe their children in the classroom.

Parents explained that they understood much better what their children were learning when they had the opportunity to observe and participate. Lilli in New York City said that she was worried about what the teachers had told her about learning through play, but that when she could see the learning taking place in the classroom she understood how this type of learning worked.

Suggestions

When teachers say hello to parents, smile and nod when they come in the room, and then approach them as soon as possible, parents feel that they are in the right place and are welcome. Opening a classroom so that parents can come to

visit or volunteer during the school day makes it possible for more parents to observe and become involved. This is important for immigrant parents who, for linguistic, cultural, or economic reasons, may be hesitant or unable to visit their children's school but are curious about what classrooms look like and how they function in the United States (Rodríguez-Brown 2009). Requiring parents to schedule classroom visits may deter them from visiting if they suddenly have a day free, a longer break, or some unexpected free time. This doesn't mean that teachers need to feel that their classroom is constantly chaotic, but that parents know they are welcome to visit and volunteer in the classroom. In the beginning of the year, teachers can make it especially clear to immigrant parents that they are welcome anytime and then demonstrate it when they arrive.

Recognizing and valuing immigrant parents and immigrant communities

For schools, teachers, and programs that wish to strengthen their relationships with immigrant families and their communities, we recommend finding ways to seek information and expertise from immigrant parents before implementing programs, policies, or new initiatives. Some schools in our study created mentorship programs in which alumni immigrant parents partner with new immigrant parents to learn about early education. New parents welcomed this opportunity to share their thoughts about early education with other immigrant parents. Teachers who do not share linguistic or cultural ties with the children they teach can seek guidance, cultural insights, and expertise from immigrant teachers or immigrant community members (Adair 2011). Monolingual teachers can spend time in and support immigrant communities, giving them insight into families' lives outside of the school. Teachers can support parents' efforts to speak their home language at home by allowing children and parents to demonstrate their linguistic knowledge in the classroom (for an example of this, see Riojas-Cortez 2001).

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It can be overwhelming to balance the increasing rigors of early childhood education settings with learning about, acknowledging, and including the cultures of communities different from your own. Showing authentic affection and patience for immigrant children, being respectful to the families and seeing them as experts, using their home language, and welcoming them to the classroom—as you welcome all parents—aid in recognizing and valuing the voices of immigrant parents.



Conclusion

Perhaps this goal of listening to families is best exemplified by a teacher who works closely with the immigrant parents in her classroom. She never assumes she fully understands a family but instead seeks relationships that help her be the best teacher possible for the children in the classroom.

I think it makes a difference when we try to get to know a family because, regardless of the culture, sometimes we don't understand what is happening. We try to build a relationship with the parents because knowing and talking with them may be the lost link, the piece of the puzzle that was missing.

Listening carefully to parents means taking their ideas seriously and seeing them as experts on their own children. When teachers work hard at developing relationships with immigrant parents, they can more actively and positively serve the young children of immigrants in their classrooms.

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