How My Immigrant Experience Shaped My Work with Families and Schools

Dorothy Rich

We lived in the small town of Monroe, Michigan, with a population under 20,000. My parents were immigrants who spoke little English, and I went to the public school down the street. I was not different from many children of immigrants today who are struggling just to make it and to be accepted into America. My own history may be a major factor in the curricula I develop for families and the immediate appeal it has for today's immigrants. I hadn't realized the connection until I was in a meeting with Hispanic parents, discussing their children. I said to them, "I, too, am a child of immigrants. What you want for your children, my parents wanted for me." In Florida and California, the vast majority of families participating in our MegaSkills® school/home programs are Hispanic. This set me thinking about what I may have forgotten about my own school experiences as a child of immigrants.

My mother signed my report cards. I saved some of those cards, and I see her signature still. It was difficult for her to write in English. Yet there was no question about the report cards or their importance. It was impressed on me over and over that I was supposed to work hard and get high grades.

I'm not sure how other children of immigrants feel, but I know that it wasn't easy being "different." Monroe in the 1930's and 1940's was a white bread town—everyone was white and everyone spoke English. Foreigners were tolerated, (there weren't many of us) but we were still foreign. And I was a child of foreigners.

My parents had pronounced accents when they spoke English. They often spoke together in Yiddish, not just so the children wouldn't understand,

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but also because it was more comfortable for them. I hate to admit this, but it is true that I often felt ashamed of their accent and their foreign mannerisms. That made me different, too, and if there is one thing children don't want to be, it's different.

My differences, while they hurt at the time, have been a source of strength for me as I have gone through life. I thank my father and his immigrant drive for much of what I have been able to accomplish. I was a girl at a time when girls were supposed to get married, raise a family, settle down and not really do very much on their own outside the home.

My father did not have a lot of parenting experience. My mother died when I was 13, and it was not an easy time. My father worked over twelve hours a day six days a week in his photography studio just to make a living. I have a brother who is four years older, and both of us had depended on our mother for all the parenting we received. She provided lots of it, and then she was gone.

The culture of the school was different from the culture of my immigrant home. The school was a "cool" sanctuary compared to the "heat" of my home. At home, feelings were intense and emotions often boiled over. The school was traditional and established; it had confident, set rules and schedules. The teachers in those days were not quite gods, but almost. It was impossible for me not to be in awe of school. I'd go home reminding and admonishing my "greenhorn" parents that this was or was not "the way" things had to be done. This is what the teacher says. The teacher was the authority. The school in its workings was a mysterious, omnipotent place, a powerful force that determines the present and the future. I was frightened of it, and yet I wanted to understand it.

It wasn't all that clear or obvious to me then, but maybe this is the reason I wanted to become a teacher—to gain through teaching that sense of being in charge, of knowing how things worked, a sense that I didn't feel as a student in school or as a child at home. Maybe this is why I have spent so much time figuring out, writing, and talking about what parents and teachers need to know about each other and about how to decipher the mysterious workings of the school.

Unlike parents today, parents back then did not receive tips about what to ask and what to say at parent-teacher conferences. Nobody told them about school policies, and compacts, and annual plans. There was little if any connection between school and home. Teachers did their thing, and parents did theirs. It was really not until I became a parent as well as a teacher that I began to understand the importance of connecting the work of the school with the work of the home. It became increasingly clear to me that so much was happening in both places affecting children's success. It seemed right for me to find ways to make the school more open and less mysterious, to build a synergy of effort between the significant

adults in children's lives.

More and more, I am convinced that my own immigrant experience is the bedrock of the work of the Home and School Institute. I want to pass on what I have learned, so that other immigrants can come to know and understand schools. I do not speak the language of many families using my programs, but it is clear from their response that we both speak the language of immigrant aspirations for children. Immigrants travel a long way to go to school. The cross miles and cultural divides. This voyage and their desire to learn are enormous strengths. Many immigrants are scared; I was. Many are often needy and unready in the traditional sense; I was, too. Yet many if not most immigrant learners come searching, knowing that they have a vital need to "know." These are opportune moments, brief periods that can pass quickly. That is why schools must build on and work to preserve immigrant learning strengths and drives, through a strong partnership with the home.

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