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Immigrant student parents are a group apart

They face different challenges than mature or international students.

By FERZANA CHAZE | January 23, 2013

Immigrating is a stressful rite of passage. For a growing number of newcomers to Canada, the rite of passage continues well after arrival.

A majority of immigrants to Canada have entered under the economic class, under a point system that awards them merit for higher/professional education, language ability and years of work experience. Once in Canada, however, their education and work experience is not often recognized by employers or professional bodies. Most newcomers reluctantly face the prospect of needing to re-qualify in order to work in their chosen professions. Like other mature students, immigrants need to leave behind years of education and work experience and take up roles as learners. Like other international students, they grapple with understanding the educational and cultural system they find themselves in. However, immigrant students who are also juggling family responsibilities face a unique set of challenges.

For every student, cost is a consideration but for a student parent from an immigrant family, costs are paramount. The partner who isn't in school has to earn a living to support the rest of the family despite their own barriers in securing employment (credentials that aren't accepted at par, not speaking the language well or with a pronounced accent, a lack of "Canadian experience"). The working parent's income probably won't be enough to pay for childcare. So, most immigrant parents need to hold a part-time (if not full-time) job while studying just to pay the bills.

Emotional costs are paramount

Then there are the emotional costs. Immigrants typically leave behind a social network to make a new life in a society where they might not know anyone. Without social support, what is the immigrant family to do when a sick child cannot go to daycare? How can the immigrant student take advantage of the networking and informal learning opportunities on campus if she has to rush home to pick up the kids from daycare or carry out the host of jobs associated with parenting? How does the immigrant student stop feeling guilty for not "being there" for their family, especially when the family has already lost so many meaningful relationships because of immigrating? In many cases, the working partner takes on an additional burden in the care of finances, running the home and care of children.

There is also the strain of re-learning, not only the content but also the context of education. A key aspect of education in North America is the emphasis on critical thinking. Students here are also encouraged to develop a rounded personality through a variety of sports, extracurricular activities, community service, and even employment while going through high school, creating a level of self-reliance, social skills, independent thinking and enterprise that is highly valued in North America. Coming from a system where the emphasis has been on securing the highest grades possible to the neglect of all other aspects of learning, immigrants are often at a great disadvantage in the Canadian classroom. Their traditional ways of learning (such as an unchallenging

reverence for existing knowledge) does not encourage thinking that challenges existing knowledge.

Immigrant parents may prefer to focus on getting through the system with as few involvements outside of the classroom as possible, as they did at home. But they will pay for this in the lost opportunity to network. Networking is one of the most effective job search strategies, and being a student offers many opportunities to show one's potential, through clubs, volunteer groups, student politics, seminars, workshops. Yet these activities are additional demands on time that the immigrant student- parent may not have or might not consider important.

My personal experience

Eight years ago, I immigrated to Canada with my husband and four-year-old child. Three days later I began a year of graduate school at a Canadian university, where I had to redo a master's of social work degree to qualify for doctoral training. A few months after I graduated with a new master's degree, I gave birth to my second child.

The year in between is a blur, but quite a number of things do stand out: adjusting to a new environment while trying to do well in a school; feeling completely at sea in courses that assumed a high-performing student who is well-grounded in Canadian culture and context; financial strain; the absence of familiar support networks. What helped me get through that first year was my supportive spouse, friends and colleagues that I met through my program and the practicum placement at university, and my previous non-Canadian education.

For those who do manage this ultimate juggling act, the payoffs are immense. A local qualification is often the key to entry into the profession that the immigrant trained for in their home country. Student internships are opportunities to look for footholds into companies and other organizations. The contacts made while studying could provide the references needed to apply for jobs.

With such promising end results, the question is what can be done to make this time in school less stressful and more beneficial for the immigrant student parents, and in turn for the university. Many universities offer special services for mature students and for international students. The former presuppose challenges to the student returning to school after a number of years away, while the latter presumes a younger student population trying to acclimatize to the Canadian university system.

Immigrant student parents have needs beyond the scope of both these kinds of services. What they need is support on many counts: information on living in Canada and the Canadian education system; advice on how to cope with returning to school while juggling parenting and family survival; and information on how to access services that might make their transition less stressful or might provide appropriate references. They also benefit from supportive counseling that acknowledges their unique needs and provides referrals to other assistance such as parenting help, support groups and mentorship programs.

Immigrants are severely disadvantaged by not having connections with people who can be referees for future jobs or scholarship or award applications. It is time for university programs to be aware of the unique vulnerabilities of immigrant students and to incorporate an action plan to address these among its student population.

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