

Book Review

***Preschool and Immigrants in Five Countries: England, France, Germany, Italy and United States of America*, edited by Joseph Tobin. Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang publication, 2016, 223 pages.**

Immigration is one of the most challenging social issues many nations around the world are facing today. Over the past fifteen years the number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow rapidly, reaching 244 million in 2015 (United Nations, 2016). The United Nations Children's Fund reported that nearly 50 million children have been uprooted—28 million of them driven from their homes by conflicts and millions more migrating in the hope of finding a better and safer life (UNICEF, 2016).

As nations struggle to develop rational immigration policies, educational settings including preschools grapple with questions of “how to best serve the immigrant children and their families coming through their doors” (p. 9). They know little about what experiences immigrant children bring to school or what their parents want from their preschool programs (Mantovani & Tobin, 2016). Yet, this knowledge is critical because, as Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2012) point out, a “clash” of cultures between teachers’ and students’ backgrounds creates barriers for learning and teaching in a classroom and leads to marginalization of students whose home cultures and language practices differ from the cultural and language practices of their teachers (Levinson, 2007; Lyutykh, Strickland, Fasoli & Adera, 2016). While adults are still struggling to solve these larger issues, millions of children who become border crossers move back and forth each day between the conflicting cultural worlds of home and school experiencing issues of isolation, loneliness, and separation.

The edited collection of *Preschool and Immigrants in Five Countries: England, France, Germany, Italy and United States of America* (2016) by Tobin and his international colleagues, sheds light on the issues around the educational experiences of preschool immigrant children and their parents in England, France, Germany, Italy and the United States of America. Following several important goals, this cross-national, cross-cultural, comparative qualitative study offers valuable insight on how schools can develop interpretive structures for inviting immigrant parents to participate and engage in dialogue with practitioners to provide the best education and care for their children and how these perspectives be reflected back to policy makers, researchers and practitioners.

The book begins with an introduction followed by two large sections. The first section, comprising six chapters, is dedicated to the description of the goals that have driven the project, the role of the researchers as “insiders and outsiders” (p. 7), the history of the project, and the research methods—videotaping, focus group, coding—utilized for data collection. The second part consists of eleven chapters that reflect the findings of the project. The essence of these findings comes from focus group discussions between the researchers, ethnically diverse immigrant parents, and the educators that were provoked by videotapes showing a typical day in a single child care setting in the countries participating in the project. Despite the great variety of cultural and

national contexts in which the project took place, the themes that emerged during the focused interactions, on parental involvement, curriculum and pedagogy, language and identity were common across all five countries.

One of the key problems that emerged during the focus group interactions, in preschools across the countries and settings, was a low level of parental involvement. The teacher participants perceived parents as “not understanding or even resisting what they are doing for children” and blamed them for “not taking sufficient interest in their children’s education” (p. 12), and the immigrant parents expressed a great desire to be involved in school (and the wider host society) but simply did not know how to be involved. Researchers found that cultural values, beliefs, and parent expectations about their role in their children’s education vary from country to country and pose challenges for both teachers and immigrant parents.

Therefore, to break the wall of alienation between these two worlds of school and home, the authors call for making a shift from the traditional notion of parental involvement, focused on school giving information to parents, toward “more reciprocal, symmetrical, dialogical relationships” (p. 12). Researchers stressed a need for both parties, parents and practitioners, to be involved in the cultural negotiation or “a dialogue that includes discussion about the problems and possibilities of creating preschool programs that reflect the values and beliefs of both immigrant communities and of the societies to which they have moved” (p.13).

Another common issue that raised debate among practitioners and parents across the five countries was the question of the proper balance between play and direct instruction in preschool curriculum. Whereas there was a consensus among the American, German, English, and Italian practitioners who favored a child-centered, play-based approach to early childhood education and care, the French teachers leaned towards more direct instruction and emphasized learning or work over play. “You come to school to work, you leave your toys at home. We are here to work!”(p. 89). While this emphasis on early academic learning was somewhat supported by all immigrant parents across the five countries, the American and French immigrant parents expressed this wish more rigidly in comparison to their other European counterparts.

The authors speculate that the parents’ beliefs on the education of their young children are influenced by the values of their children’s teachers and the larger society to which they have immigrated, as well as their educational experiences in their home countries where the schools “were more authoritarian and less constructivist” (p. 79). The researchers also note that parents who “emigrate from more traditional societies, who are religious, and/or working class urban or agrarian backgrounds tend to hold more conservative views of education” (p. 79). Most importantly, the study findings indicate that many immigrant parents want the preschool to provide more emphasis on academic instruction or “on host language acquisition, not based on the theory of learning but instead on pragmatic concerns about how their child will do in primary school and the consequences of their child doing poorly” (p. 80). Thus, as Tobin and his colleagues highlight, while there are many inconsistencies on curricular beliefs that exist between early childhood practitioners and immigrant parents, the question about how to begin the conversation where both parties come to the table freely expressing their honest concerns and hopes for the child still remains open.

The other important question that came to the light during the cross-cultural and cross-national focus group interactions was the maintenance of heritage languages that closely relates to immigrant children’s cultural identities. Here again, researchers found that while English, German, Italian, and American teachers emphasized the retention and development of home language

believing that “bilingualism facilitates children’s adjustment to school, allows for easy communication with immigrant parents, and supports children’s heritage language” (p. 119), most teachers and parents in France perceived bilingual education in a negative way that “promotes communitarianism and undermines social cohesion” (p.119). However, the lack of knowledge and skills to adequately work with second language learners and misconceptions about bilingualism united all of the teachers in this study.

What became obvious through this book is that immigrant parents believe that children’s acquisition of home language (L1) hinders their learning of the host language (L2) which, in their view, is more important than the home language for children’s social adjustment and future academic and life success in the host country. However, it is important to highlight that the mother tongue issue is not only about helping the child to become fluent in the second language while retaining fluency in their home language, but it is also about immigrant children’s cultural identity. The findings of this study indicate that raising transcultural children is a challenge both for early childhood educators and immigrant parents. While immigrant parents need to help their children to be connected and become part of both home and host cultures, “preschool teachers need to learn to see immigrant children as both the same and different from their native-born students, and support these children’s struggles to be both Italian and Chinese, Tunisian, or Albanian” (p.149).

It is a great advantage for children to grow up bilingual and bicultural and develop “positive identities” (Brooker & Woodhead, 2008, as cited in Tobin, 2016, p.149). However, this requires tremendous effort from both sides: the wider host society and the schools on one hand and the immigrant parents on the other. The authors conclude the book with several important recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and parents, including that all children in school need to be supported to think critically in order to promote “pluralistic, multicultural and multilingual citizenship,” which “requires a systematic effort, which starts with new approaches to early childhood education” (p.149).

However, analyzing this research from practical perspective, one might ask what are these new approaches and how to develop them. Thus, while the study significantly contributes to the body of existing knowledge on problems in educating immigrant children, questions like how to solve the challenges that both early childhood practitioners and immigrant families/children face in raising and educating bilingual bicultural children, how to work out the disagreements, and how to bring both parties to the table to compromise were still not answered.

Overall, in light of the “problem” of American and European classrooms becoming increasingly diverse and teachers “have little knowledge or experience on working with people from other cultures” (Cushner et al., 2012, p.18), this study offers valuable insight on what experiences immigrant children and their families bring to school and how schools in different countries attempt to respond to these new challenges while helping all children—immigrant and nonimmigrant—succeed in school and life. Twenty-first-century schools need to start treating diversity as a resource rather than as a deficiency. How to effectively access and utilize this resource depends on how well educators and parents are able to engage in dialogue and negotiation, a process that Tobin and his colleagues have successfully started.

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