Sociocultural Issues in Language Minority Education

U.S. Born Cambodian Learners' Struggle for Cultural Identity

Large numbers of Cambodians began coming to the United States in 1980. The unique nature of their Asian and Buddhist background plus the overwhelmingly rural, uneducated profile of most families who arrived after fleeing the holocaust created enormous challenges for the first generation of refugees. Many of Cambodian U.S. born, second-generation children are experiencing unique challenges of their own, which is the subject of this Bulletin.

Please note that the following descriptions are general and may not apply to specific individuals.

CULTURAL PROFILE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF U.S. CULTURE

1. The egalitarian identity of U.S. born Cambodian children fostered in schools comes into conflict with the strong emphasis on clearly defined roles between child and parent in the home. The highly valued Cambodian tradition of filial obedience and responsibility is often challenged by the children's adoption in school of the U.S. cultural tendency to allow for individual expression and experimentation with lifestyle choices. By sharp contrast, first generation Cambodian parents are accustomed to a collective approach to daily life and a strong respect for status and authority rooted in group harmony. This often creates an unresolved dissonance within families, creating family friction and an unwillingness of children to accept their parents as role models.

2. Parental practice of the Buddhist values of wisdom and compassion with the ideal goal of eliminating desire and material goods as indicators of spiritual success, differs dramatically from U.S. values of hard work and achievement of material success. The degree of influence instilled by the family's continuing religious practice will directly influence their children's ability to cope with the strong material messages given out by U.S. mass media.

3. Although education is strongly valued in Cambodian culture, the lack of parents' education leads to their inability to broker and navigate mid and high end career professions for their children. The path for academic success leading to maximizing career choices is complex in the United States. Parents often lack the tools for helping either children or themselves in this manner.
4. Many U.S. born children, lacking facility in the Khmer language, struggle to communicate with their Cambodian-born parents. Cambodian-born mothers, who typically know little English, are used to developing especially strong relationships with their children. These relationships are diminished linguistically and culturally, as the children become schooled. Many children lose their speaking knowledge of Khmer and resist using their diminishing home language competence to act as interpreters and translators for their parents.

5. There is a strong "culture of silence" in the family setting, i.e., a tendency for parents not to discuss explicit behaviors. As a result, differing U.S. cultural practices are not examined or discussed critically in relation to Cambodian values.

THE RESULT OF MARGINALIZATION

Many learners of Cambodian background are marginalized, struggling unsuccessfully to adapt to U.S. culture. The marginalization, however, differs from generation to generation; parents are marginalized because of difficulty acquiring English and/or overcoming their lack of education; minimal education in Cambodia; being forced to work in low-paying jobs; and the U.S.; adherence to values and assumptions antithetical to western traditions. This combination of characteristics causes first-generation parents to live outside of mainstream U.S. society.

U.S.-born Cambodian children are often marginalized from both their parents and society. Quickly acquiring English conversational fluency upon starting school; losing their home language, creating a communication gap leading to alienation from their parents; and exhibiting independent behavior transgressing the boundaries of traditional parental authority—any combination of these characteristics tends to alienate children from their parents.

Similarly, U.S.-born children acculturate but have difficulty assimilating with peers or in school life due to their different background. Some of the difficulties facing many learners are: lack of parental guidance that connects the value of long-term education with career success and lack of knowledge of how to negotiate the complex and complicated landscape of secondary schooling leading to ongoing education.

BECOMING AN ADVOCATE

Educators can mitigate the tough challenges faced by marginalized learners of Cambodian background by advocating for them. In the process of engaging in the schooling of these learners, they need to:

1. Get to know the Cambodian students personally and help negotiate both their learning and their understanding of schooling and societal expectations and values;

2. Through an interpreter and/or community resource specialist, if necessary, try to connect with the parents concerning issues that affect the academic success of the student(s);

3. When necessary, connect learners of Cambodian background with school counselors to help broker an understanding of the challenges facing the learners' personal lives, as well as the responsibilities these learners have to themselves;

4. Advocate for ways to convey greater understanding of the learners' cultural heritage through the content being taught;

5. On a broader scale, advocate for federal, state, and/or regional support programs to address the social, mental, and educational health of these learners.

Source:

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