IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOCUS

ABSTRACT

Immigrant children and youth have the potential to contribute to a prosperous future for Canada on the globalized world stage. Unfortunately, the disparity between the complex linguistic, acculturative, psychological and economic needs of immigrant children and youth and a persistent lack of responsive, coordinated services and support in Canadian institutions and service organizations has threatened to jeopardize the realization of the full potential – and the future socioeconomic contribution – of young immigrants. This article elaborates on the interlinked and complex needs of immigrant children and youth in the social services, health, education and justice arenas, and on the home, school and community environments in which these needs and issues arise. It discusses challenges in services for immigrant children and youth, and outlines opportunities for policy and service development.

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Immigrant children and youth have established a strong presence in Canadian society. The foreign-born population in Canada is 18.4% of the total population, its highest level in 70 years (Statistics Canada, 2003). A significant number of children and youth were born outside of Canada. Of the 1.8 million immigrants who arrived during the 1990s, 309,700, or 17%, were school-aged children and youth between 5 and 16 (Statistics Canada, 2003). Furthermore, many Canadian-born children are raised in first-generation immigrant households, contributing to the 10.5% of the population with home languages other than English or French (Statistics Canada, 2002).

Myriad success stories illustrate how adaptable immigrant children and youth can be and how well they integrate into Canadian society. Their stories of resilience and triumph offer glimpses of the positive role they will play in the future socioeconomic well-being of our nation. Still, a significant number of immigrant children and youth are not faring well. They are experiencing complex linguistic, acculturative, psychological and economic difficulties. Their challenges call for policy makers, NGOs and researchers to understand their unique issues better, and develop responsive policies and services both to address their needs and to maximize their potential and contribution.

This article draws upon two multistakeholder participatory action research initiatives in Calgary, namely Conversations for Change – *An Overview of Services for Immigrant Children and Youth in Calgary and Immigrant Children in Focus: A Map of Needs Strategies and Resources*[1] (see Hurlock, McCullagh & Schissel, 2004; Ngo, 2004). It outlines the unique needs of immigrant children and youth in the social services, health, education and justice arenas, elaborates on the challenges in services for immigrant children and youth, and suggests opportunities for policy and service development for all service providers and jurisdictions.

Issues Facing Immigrant Children and Youth

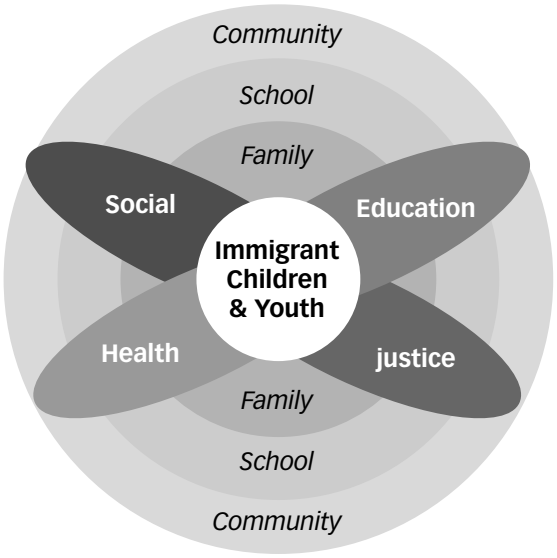
Immigrant children and youth face diverse linguistic, acculturative, psychological and socioeconomic challenges in their daily lives. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate their interlinked and complex needs with respect to social services, health, education and justice, and the contexts in which these needs and issues arise, namely the home environment, the school environment and the community environment.

Social Service Arena

In their cultural adjustment, immigrant children and youth often experience cognitive and emotional changes due to cultural shock, unfamiliarity with new cultural norms and practices, and grief at leaving behind familiar language, culture and community. Many struggle to achieve a positive cultural identity as they deal with community values that may conflict with those at home. Their development of cultural identity may be further complicated by internalized racism, resulting from exposure to pervasive negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities.

With respect to social support, many children and youth experience family separation, difficulties in forming cross-ethnic friendships, over-reliance on support from peers with similar cultural

FIGURE 1
An interactive model of needs of immigrant children and youth



backgrounds, alienation and isolation, and limited access to positive role models and mentors. Older children, in particular, often find it difficult to form friendships since they arrive at an age when their peers already have well-established social networks.

In their transition into adulthood, immigrant youth have the highest unemployment rate in Canada, at 20% for those aged 15 to 24, compared to the national rate of 8% (Statistics Canada, 2001). Those with sporadic education, poor literacy skills and limited English often struggle to make a smooth transition into the labour market.

Conflicting expectations of gender roles with respect to rights, privileges and responsibilities create stress for children and youth. In some immigrant families, girls have more household responsibilities. They also experience more restrictions, parental control and supervision than their Canadian-born counterparts do, particularly with respect to dating and relationships with peers.

Another subgroup, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) immigrant youth, is a vulnerable population with high rates of suicide, attempted suicide, depression, violence, victimization, substance abuse and HIV-associated risky behaviour. The intersection of race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation often compromises their healthy development and well-being. These young people face tremendous individual, family and societal barriers in coming to terms with their own identity and being accepted and appreciated by others. They often face fear, internalized homophobia, rejection and ostracism by family and community members, social stigma, harassment and gay-bashing.

Health Arena

Immigrant children and youth who are raised in families with disadvantaged socioeconomic status are at risk of malnutrition. They may experience low birth weight, obesity, and adopt unhealthy eating habits.

Many children and youth have migrated from developing countries that have high exposure to communicable diseases, including HIV infection, tuberculosis, acute respiratory infections, intestinal parasites, measles, hepatitis B, diarrheal disease, cholera, and schistosomiasis (Cookson, Waldman, Gushulak, MacPherson, Burkle, Paquet, Kliewer & Walker, 1998). In terms of sexual and reproductive health, immigrant children and youth may come from countries with strong sexuality taboos, high incidences of sexually transmitted infections, and cultural practices such as female genital mutilation. In Canada, they may experience confusion about sexual biology and sexual health issues, as a result of the conflicting messages from a sexualized popular culture and media, and lack of access to reproductive health and sex education.

With respect to chronic conditions, children and youth of certain ethnic groups are at higher risks for blood-related diseases, such as sickle cell anaemia and thalassemia. Some have been exposed to environmental toxins in their home countries. Others are vulnerable to respiratory conditions, particularly asthma, due to sudden climate changes, poor housing conditions and exposure to tobacco smoke at home.

Children and youth from refugee backgrounds are vulnerable to mental, emotional and behavioural disorders. Those who were subjected to persecution, war, violence, loss of family members and trauma in their home countries or during migration are more likely to experience post-traumatic stress syndrome. Racism and discrimination in Canada have also contributed to poor mental health for many visible minorities.

Education Arena

In a new school environment, immigrant children have to understand school routines, rights and responsibilities and social customs, and they and their parents need to learn how to access support services. Linguistic and cultural barriers, socioeconomic status, patterns of acculturation and other individual issues can make it difficult to identify and assess the educational and social needs of immigrant children and youth.

In major urban school boards, between 20% to 50% of the students are of an English as a Second Language (ESL) background (Dawson, 1998, Dempster & Albert, 1998; McInnes, 1993). These students have either arrived from non-English speaking countries, or were born in Canada in immigrant families who do not speak English at home. They require between 2 and 5 years of explicit English language instruction to develop basic communication skills and between 5 and 7 years to develop academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1994; Collier, 1989). ESL learners require both structured language instruction from qualified ESL teachers in an ESL instructional setting, and explicit language support for content classes. Many continue to need ESL support well into their post-secondary years.

The first language spoken by ESL learners plays a dynamic role in facilitating understanding of culture, bridging intergenerational gaps with parents and developing healthy cultural identity. It can serve as a springboard for cognitive development in the English language. Unfortunately, many immigrant children and youth do not have access to opportunities to learn and practice their heritage languages.

TABLE 1
Summary of major issues facing immigrant children and youth

INDIVIDUAL ISSUES	SOCIAL SERVICES	HEALTH	EDUCATION	JUSTICE
	Cultural adjustment Social support and belonging Cultural identity Sexual identity Gender roles Internalized racism Employment	Nutrition Communicable diseases Sexual and reproductive health Chronic health conditions Mental health problems Pre-migration and migration trauma	Unfamiliarity with schooling in Canada Appropriate assessments ESL instruction Support in content classrooms Support for students with special needs Support for heritage languages	Transitions Criminal gangs and violence Substance abuse Prostitution Issues in youth justice process
HOME ENVIRONMENT	Basic needs Employment Language and adult literacy Family literacy Social networks and support Incongruent rates of acculturation Family violence Civic participation			
SCHOOL COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT	Access to systemic, culturally competent support Parental involvement Belonging and participation in school activities Interaction with peers and school staff Racism and discrimination			
COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT	Belonging and community participation Racism and discrimination Socioeconomic conditions Negative influences			

The practice of age-appropriate placement in Canada can leave immigrant children and youth at a loss in their classes. Those with sporadic education and limited literacy skills require concrete literacy and academic support to achieve a level of academic success equivalent to that of their Canadian-born English-speaking counterparts of the same age. On the other hand, children and youth who are inappropriately placed in classrooms with children several years younger also may as a consequence experience socio-psychological difficulties.

Unique linguistic and sociocultural challenges, compounded by the lack of responsive support in the education system, have limited the academic success of immigrant children and youth. Those of an ESL background are two or more years behind their native English-speaking counterparts by the time they reach sixth grade (Cummins, 1981). The dropout rates among ESL learners are significantly high, between 61% and 74% (Alberta Education, 1992; Gunderson, 2004; Watt & Roessingh, 1994, 2001). Communication skills and GPAs of university students who are sons and daughters of immigrants, independent of length of time in Canada, are not as high as those of native-born English-speaking Canadians (Grayson, 2004).

Justice Arena

Traumatic migration experience, poverty, limited English, intergenerational and family conflicts, social isolation, lack of a sense of belonging, and discrimination make immigrant children and youth vulnerable to victimization and recruitment by organized crime groups. In major cities, immigrant youth are reported to be involved in criminal gangs and violent activities, trafficking and use of drugs, and prostitution.

When immigrant youth are in conflict with the law, they experience a wide range of issues in their contact with police and youth justice court procedures. These include distrust and fear of authority figures, limited knowledge about the Canadian justice system, lack of understanding of their constitutional rights, problems understanding and providing accurate information during investigation and court proceedings due to limited English, and cultural misinterpretation in communication. When sentenced to extrajudicial measures and sanctions, custodial sentences or community sentencing, immigrant youth may have limited access to meaningful community services and culturally responsive rehabilitative, counselling, and educational services. Many have difficulty understanding the conditions of probation.

Home, School and Community Environments

Home, school and community environments influence the wellbeing and success of immigrant children and youth. A significant number of immigrant children and youth are growing up in households impacted by a range of

socioeconomic issues such as culture and language barriers, unemployment or underemployment, social isolation, illiteracy, discrimination and limited civic participation. With a poverty rate of 30% for immigrants living in cities (Lee, 2000), immigrant households struggle to meet basic needs, such as food, housing, clothing, child care and transportation.

In school, immigrant children and youth may not have access to culturally competent support. The lack of system leadership and limited participation of immigrant parents in school activities have left decisions regarding language instruction and services for immigrant children and youth at the discretion and political will of individual school administrators. Consequently, school services for immigrant children and youth have been provided on an ad-hoc basis and given low priority. Notably, many immigrant children and youth with limited English have received minimal, if any, direct language instruction. Without adequate support, immigrant children and youth are substantially less likely to participate in school activities. They may also struggle to connect to their peers and school personnel.

At the community level, a combination of the lack of culturally inclusive programs and limited awareness of community resources and services has resulted in low levels of participation of immigrant children and youth in community activities and services. Individual, institutional and cultural racism and discrimination have denied many immigrant children and youth a sense of belonging and driven them into social isolation and alienation. Concentrations of immigrant families in neighbourhoods with low socioeconomic status further hinder immigrant young people from accessing a wide range of community resources and opportunities. Immigrant children and youth living in impoverished areas are also more likely to be exposed to negative influences, such as aggressive recruitment by criminal groups.

Of the 1.8 million immigrants who arrived during the 1990s, 309,700, or 17%, were school-aged children and youth between 5 and 16 (Statistics Canada, 2003). Furthermore, many Canadian-born children are raised in first-generation immigrant households, contributing to the 10.5% of the population with home languages other than English or French.

Challenges in Services for Immigrant Children and Youth

Several emerging service issues have had impact on the access of immigrant children and youth to resources and services. Service providers are challenged by the lack of coordination and comprehensiveness of support. Existing services often do not provide longitudinal support due to a lack of accessible and sustainable funding.

Even when there are services available, service providers frequently do not know where to refer immigrant children and youth. This is partly because their needs are so complex and they are uncertain whether the existing services are equipped to handle their issues. Some service providers have struggled to understand the needs of immigrant children and youth, and connect to these young people. Many are doubtful whether their services are inclusive and accessible to immigrant children and youth. They struggle with the basic challenge of limited availability of translation and interpretation services. All of these issues speak to the need for cultural competency in all services related to health, education, justice, and social services. Service providers face challenges in integrating cultural diversity in all aspects of their work, including policy and service development, communication, resource allocation, hiring and professional development.

Funding competition in the age of scarce resources and a fear of sharing information and knowledge have impeded partnerships. Service providers have yet to fully explore and capitalize on partnership opportunities among schools, family resource centres, mainstream organizations, immigrant serving agencies and ethnocultural groups. There is a need for joint advocacy efforts to address systemic factors that impact immigrant children and youth and their families, such as poverty, language, health, education and employment.

Recommendations

The future of immigrant children and youth will affect the future of Canada: it has to be everyone's business. There are opportunities for policy makers, NGOs and researchers to work collaboratively to ensure availability of quality services for immigrant children and youth. Nationally, the federal government must champion a national strategy that focuses on the education, resettlement and integration of immigrant children and youth. This strategy should involve all federal departments, including Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Health Canada, Industry Canada, Canadian Heritage, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Justice Canada, and Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (National Crime Prevention Strategy), to develop department-specific actions and inter-departmental initiatives to support school- and community-based programs that address identified needs of immigrant children and youth in the social service, health, education and justice arenas. Some of the areas of priority are research on immigrant children and youth, English language instruction, reception and orientation services, cross-cultural and trauma counselling, child/youth and family literacy, multicultural liaison, prevention of and intervention in crime, vocational training for youth with low literacy skills or sporadic education, the role of heritage languages, parental participation, cultural competency training, school and community inclusion, and poverty. The federal government needs to work with the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada to replicate or expand the bilateral agreement that provides federal funding for teaching children official languages, and to establish national benchmarks and standards for identification, assessment, curriculum, instruction and tracking of progress of immigrant children and youth with ESL needs.

At the provincial level, ministries of education need to ensure ESL curricula for all levels. They need to establish

research-based funding formulas with built-in accountability measures, and remove unjustifiable funding restrictions, such as fiscally-driven three or five year funding caps. Due to the extraordinary circumstances of many learners from refugee backgrounds, ministries may consider extending the age cap to accommodate learners with delayed or disrupted schooling. Ministries of education can also play a leadership role in ensuring that pre-service training in education and other professional fields integrates cultural competency in all courses. Other provincial departments related to health, social services and justice need to develop strategies to support school- and community-based initiatives to address needs of immigrant children and youth.

At the municipal level, service providers in the health, education, social services and justice sectors need to work in partnership to plan and implement inter-sectoral and system-wide coordination of services for immigrant children and youth. They further have to develop and integrate cultural competency in all practices. Community groups and schools need to work with parents of immigrant children and youth to help them develop the competency to advocate on behalf of their children and influence decisions regarding the availability and quality of services for them. Since children and youth spend a great deal of their time at school, service providers and community groups can strengthen relationships with schools to further promote the educational, social and cultural development of immigrant children and youth. Leadership in schools and school boards can also play an important role in the development of policies, regulations and programs that address pedagogically sound instruction, equitable resource allocation, staff development, accountability measures and tracking of students' progress.

Conclusion

In light of a declining birthrate, an aging population, the imminent retirement of the baby boomer generation and Canada's low ranking (15th place) among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries in research and development, immigrant children and youth could play an important role both in addressing Canada's new challenges and in ensuring that its future is prosperous (Greenspon, 2001; Roessingh, 2001). It is crucial that Canadian institutions develop policies and services to promote the academic success and socioeconomic well-being of immigrant children and youth. More importantly, they cannot risk being part of the development of a subculture of defeat and marginalization, in which children and youth with ESL needs, denied their right to language instruction and support services, face life-long underutilization of human potential.

Acknowledgements

The Conversation for Change: An Overview of Services for Immigrant Children and Youth in Calgary initiative was commissioned by the City of Calgary (Family and Community Support Services), United Way of Calgary and Area, Canadian Heritage, Alberta Learning, and Alberta Community Development, Human Rights and Citizenship. The *Immigrant Children in Focus* project was funded by Alberta Community Development, Human Rights and Citizenship and Canadian Heritage. We wish to thank Amal Umar and Beth Chatten for their valuable comments.

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Endnote

1 The two documents, *Conversation for change: An overview of services for immigrant children and youth in Calgary* and *Immigrant children in focus: A map of needs, strategies and resources*, are the culmination of extensive work among stakeholders across all sectors. With this research in hand and a strong commitment of all those involved to continue to work together, the City of Calgary has a good start on ensuring that immigrant children and youth get the best possible start. The documents are available at www.calgaryunitedway.org/research_reports.htm and www.eslaction.com.