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from Invisible to Visible

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Little do some educators realize that the shy immigrant students, who barely speak out in class and rarely interact with other classmates, hide more than what they reveal. They bring to class with them a wealth of knowledge embedded in their cultural and daily practices. Unfortunately, their assets often remain disguised behind a language barrier, and the students are identified with titles such as, *Limited English Proficient* and *English learners*, which reinforce a deficit view.

With immigrant populations continuously on the rise in the United States, educators need to empower linguistically and culturally diverse students by realizing the assets that students have and building on those assets in their instructional practices and daily interactions with students. Although immigrant students might not be proficient in English when they come to the United States, the households of many immigrant students are characterized by rich cultural practices, social capital, and distinctive life experiences and backgrounds. Research has looked into minority groups such as Mexican-American immigrants and found specific knowledge, skills, and abilities developed by the immigrant families which have become a characteristic of their culture and community. Researchers have referred to such unique cultural characteristics as "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Similarly, research has found evidence of capital in the cultural practices of Chinese families in Canada and the United States, and of specific literacy practices that were not identified by the school's formal education system (Li, 2000, 2007). With both ethnicities, Mexican-American and Chinese-American, the "funds of knowledge" or "cultural practices" went unrecognized by the public educational system.

Goodman (1996) and Gee (1996, 2011) along with many others (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2012; Heath 1983, 2012; Li 2008) discuss how literacy is embedded in the cultural and social contexts of groups, and that educators have to build a bridge to connect the two worlds of school and home for students to be successful. Different ethnic groups might have specific literacy practices that are characteristic of those groups and community members around them. Examples of such practices might fall under any of the following categories identified by Taylor (1983): instrumental literacy (daily tasks), social interactional literacy (networking with others), news-related literacy (knowledge of different events), recreational reading, writing as a substitute for oral messages, writing as an aid to memory, financial reading, and work-related writing. These home literacy practices, and others, represent social and cultural patterns of activity. In addition, the home backgrounds include the environment of the home where students spend time interacting with parents, siblings, and other family members; where exchange of ideas as well as cultural events take place; and where children go about conducting their daily routine activities. This also includes the social class, level of education of parents, and the composition of the family. These specific cultural characteristics represent sources of knowledge of immigrant households that might not conform to formal education in schools and which might go unnoticed in the mainstream educational system.

Different cultural practices at the family level contribute differently to children's performances at school, as established by Heath (1983). Activities such as talking, playing, and encouraging children to learn from practical sources in their environment are all considered forms of home literacy practices. However, it is not the quantity of talk that makes a difference in the lives of children, but the kind of talk. Heath's study shows that success at school requires maneuvering contexts, creating connections among texts, and ongoing social activities that are related to school content, which results in transitioning students smoothly to school. In the case of immigrant students, if educators do not attempt to understand students' contexts nor attempt to create those connections, then students are missing educational opportunities.

Similarly, my research titled, *Funds of Knowledge of Arab-American Immigrants: An Examination of the Perceptions of High School Students, Parents, and Teachers* (2016), views learners through the lens of the sociocultural theory which considers the learner a social and cultural being that is understood in the context of interactions with other individuals, contexts, and materials around them. The research could be considered a collective case study since it investigated the culturally-specific literacy practices of four Arab-American students who attended a suburban, public high school with a large Arabic population. All of the students had been in the United States for over one year, but less than five years. Gaining insight into how teachers, parents, and students perceived their educational practices and why they perceived them as they did required an examination of their viewpoints on educational practices and what impacted their educational attainment. This was achieved through conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, twice with each participant, once with two different family members, and once with two of the participant's teachers. To understand sources of capital and their home literacy habits, two one-hour home visits were conducted: one during the week, and another one on the weekend.

The different perspectives of students, parents, and teachers about the home literacy practices and

background of Arab immigrant families have the potential to inform educators about the specific cultural practices of those immigrant families. Additionally, the out-of-school activities and daily routines shed light on the skills and wealth that are embedded in their daily literacy practices and which are often not recognized within the education system.

Funds of Knowledge

What follows is a summary of funds of knowledge as reflected by the parents' perceptions of their home environments and their home literacy practices. These are followed by suggestions teachers can implement to motivate their immigrant students to achieve.

Value of Education

One of the most prominent ideas that stood out when looking at the parents' perceptions was the value of education. Immigrant parents placed great emphasis on education, which in turn was transferred to children and made them appreciate learning. For these immigrant families, education was of high value that preceded other basic needs in life, like food and socialization, because with education comes security. It was also one of the reasons families reported leaving their countries and coming to the United States. This is what one parent said:

> Education is very valuable for us as a family in the American society for many reasons: first, it keeps your knowledge going, it makes you look smart wherever you go, you know what you are talking about- it makes people look at you in a different way- to respect you, and you choose the job you want, you live the life you want, you live in a same neighborhood, same environment, you don't have obstacles.

From this quote, one can see that education serves several purposes, one of which is the foundation of a social status. Thus, education corresponds to knowledge, respect, and a good career. In addition to the highly-regarded image that education provides to an individual in society, parents revealed that the value placed on education sometimes went to the extreme, even to become a reason for existence, such as what one parent expressed:

Education is very important in my family's life. It is everything. An individual without education is a mere corpse. Education adds respect to the individual: self-respect and people's respect. Education also gives an individual more self-confidence. I want all my kids to be educated with college degrees. This comes in first place—before food.

Even though this perception is a little radical, it sheds light on how essential education is to these families.

Educational Expectations

As education was highly revered among parents of immigrant students, it resulted in parents having high educational expectations for their children. For parents, graduating from high school was an accepted pathway for their children. All parents expected their children to earn a college degree. Parents who had high achievers in their families, such as uncles and aunts with Master's Degrees, always referred to them as role models for their children. In addition, parents always talked to their children about what they would like to see them be in the future. One parent said, "All his cousins are educated and they play a role model in his life. All my family members have Master's Degrees and that sets the standards for my child to achieve higher in order to be like them." Thus, parents held their children to high standards and used family members as role models to demonstrate for them what they could achieve.

Autonomy

Another asset that Arabic immigrant students had was autonomy. Children of these immigrant families were independent learners. Due to the language barrier, parents viewed themselves as being unable to help their children with homework which restricted their role to daily verbal checks of whether students completed their school work. This was expressed in what one parent mentioned:

What makes her do well at school is that she is independent in her learning. She comes home and does her homework by herself. She does not depend on anyone for help. I do not know English so I cannot help her. I trust what she's doing and she tells me that she's doing well at school.

This parent expressed his child's autonomy which made her become an independent learner. The child was the one in charge of her school work knowing that there was no help for her at home.

Nonetheless, when some parents faced a language barrier, they resorted to other ways to keep up with their child's work at school. This was reflected in one parent's use of technology to check on how her child was doing at school by visiting the teachers' websites and keeping, "reminders on my phone for important assignments that teachers post and I keep updating it so I know what's going on at school."

Parental Support and Choice

Though the students had a lot of autonomy in their learning, parents were always supportive of their children's education. Even though parents lacked understanding of the American educational system, which was different from the educational system in their home countries in the manner of credits and graduation requirements on one hand, and the language barrier that kept them distant from direct communication with their children's teachers on the other hand, parents supported their children in other ways. They did so by providing conducive home environments and choice for children in their education.

All parents believed that the home environment should be conducive for children to learn and took responsibility to ensure that such an environment was present when children came home. One of the parents indicated:

I used to dedicate the time after I get back from work and the kids from school to my kid's homework. I closed the door of my house [for visitors] until evening time (that's when my kids have finished their homework, had dinner, and went to bed), then I can receive guests or other family members at my home. TV was also not allowed during the week days. TV was allowed on the weekends only. I would purchase the movies and watch them first to make sure they are appropriate for kids before they can see them. This will make me comfortable if the children watched the movies while I was not there.

This quote reflects how priority was always given to children's achievement. Despite the fact that socialization was an important aspect in their culture, education came first. All sources of distractions, such as TV, were eliminated when it was time to do homework.

Another parent talked about the distractions that electronics create and what parents can do about them:

> *Parents should always preach their children to do well at school, to stay focused. If they feel that the cellphone, iPad or TV are taking a lot of their kids' time, parents should advise their children that it is not the right time to use electronics when you have homework. Generally speaking, the control from parents is very important.*

This reflects the constructive role parents have in their children's lives. They realize their authority over their children and are aware of different distractions for teenagers, and thus make sure that these distractions do not impede learning.

Further, parents did not burden their children with responsibilities that distracted them from their school work. Children were not required to work to make a living, despite the humble situations of the families. Children were only expected to do some light house chores—such as mowing the grass in the summer—because parents wanted their children to be dedicated to learning and not let work take their whole time or be their focus.

Additionally, parental support was also present in the form of choice in educational routes children could take. One parent expressed that his son was free to choose his career path. The parent said, "I encourage him to attain a degree, but he can pick what he wants to be. The only thing I force him to do is to go to school until he graduates." This shows that parents were rigid with the concept of education overall, yet flexible and more releasing of responsibility when it came to the choice of career. Even though some parents named a few professions that they liked or wished their kids to have, they did not try to push them to carry on the family business or force a particular major, career, or path. In fact, they were open to letting their children decide what they wanted to do.

Friends

The role of friends in students' lives was another capital among the immigrant families I interviewed. Since the children could not find academic support for homework from parents, they had to seek help from other sources. For example, they relied on academic support from friends in the form of study buddies or study groups. The students relied on friends for doing their homework together, studying after school, going to the public library, and preparing for tests. One student said, "If you don't understand, find someone to study with. I go to my friend's house and study with her. We do better together. She is also a good student like me." Parents encouraged this kind of support. They dropped their children at the public library to finish homework with others or prepare for a test. Heath (2012) referred to this kind of support as "intimate strangers", which is based on community and human resources (p.49) and which helped stretch students' languages, values, interests, and contexts beyond what their parents could offer.

Besides academic support, children sought moral and motivational support from friends as well: "What you do outside the school also affects your grades for example, good friends – I have friends from another school that I play soccer with them and they help me practice English with them." Hence, their friends were there for them as a driving force and provided them with moral support in addition to academic support. Parents also supported these kinds of friendships—friendships with positive influences on their children.

However, the role of friends was a double-edged sword for families because, as much as families favored friends for academic purposes, they were wary of bad influences. Cultural practices such as sleep-overs came up in every conversation with the parents and students. One student expressed that her father not only forbade her from sleeping at friends' houses, but he also would not allow her to visit someone the family did not know. She said, "It's not just sleeping at a friend's house only that

he is against, it is if my dad does not know my friend and her parents, I cannot talk to her and that annoys me a lot." One parent explained that a sleep-over was forbidden since other families had boys, "Sleep-over is not allowed except at their grandparents' house. I am concerned about my kids and that's why sleep over is not allowed." The same idea was expressed by another student as she said that even though her dad allowed her to go out with friends, they had strict rules. She explained, "I am allowed to visit a friend's house, but I cannot sleep there and also my parents need to know her mom and to have spoken to her before or I am not allowed to go there to visit." One father expressed the same idea about friends, "My daughter can go study with her friends—not all friends—only those that we know and we trust, and they should also be doing well at school." Similarly, her mother said, "I would always allow them to go to school events, even with their friends, as long as I know the friends and know they are good company. If they are not good friends, I ask my kids to stay away from them." All these conversations with children and parents reflect a cultural perspective about associations with others. Both parents and children were cognizant of the peer pressure and they cared about their children's reputation. Culture surfaces in the concept of sleep overs, especially for females. This is an out-of-the-question conversation with parents. Parents also had a word in which friends their children were associating with. This theme was also demonstrated in Li's (2008) study, as well, where she found that specific cultural practices influenced children's literacy and distinguished immigrant families from mainstream families, sometimes limiting the opportunities for immigrant students.

Support Through the Extended Family
Another asset in the immigrant families' homes was the social capital and familial coalition. Although each family limited their children's interactions with friends, they put a great deal of emphasis on the importance of spending time with family. One parent expressed his beliefs by saying that, "When people live alone, they become stiff." Another parent added that relatives make you feel related and part of the group. She explained,
My extended family plays an important role in the

life of my kids. They are important because they keep the family traditions and culture, the passion among family members, the feeling that there is someone related to us that cares about us and we care about them, we respect them, stay in touch, go visit during the holidays.

Similarly, another parent explained, "We have a big extended family and we meet them during holidays and in celebrations, also when someone gets sick." She added that part of the family's cultural practices was to get together with everyone at the grandmother's house for birthdays and Eid (Islamic holiday). Another mother indicated that they celebrated all holidays and not only Islamic ones, "We always celebrate our holidays and every other holiday whether religious or American like Christmas, Halloween, Thanksgiving, anything." One father asserted that celebrations bring families together.

Thus, from the perceptions of parents, one can easily notice the cultural characteristics of the families and how their practices influence the daily lives of the parents and children. Close affiliations with extended family mean closer relationships, which result in helping and supporting each other, collectively. Their cultural celebrations bring them closer and are an important part of their social capital.

In summary, the perceptions of the parents of Arab-immigrant families revealed that they placed a high value on education which in turn raised the bar for their children and set the tone for high expectations. Parents also revealed that their children were independent learners, and their children sought support from friends to help them with homework. Parents encouraged friendships while abiding by their culture and traditions. In addition, parents asserted the importance of an environment that is conducive to learning at home. Parents' responses corresponded with students' perceptions, who also discussed the support by parents and conducive home environment, along with valuing literacy and the high expectations their parents had for them. The children were also careful in choosing their friends in keeping with their parents' expectations.

Implications for Teachers

Following are some ways that teachers can honor the home literacies of the children in school settings.

1. Help Remove the Barriers

Since immigrant family members anticipated a great future with a college degree for their children, teachers can support this philosophy and help channel the parents' dedication for learning in students. Since parents expressed that they immigrated for a better future and believe that good education is the path for that better future, educators need to recognize the full part of a glass of water before seeing the empty one. In other words, educators need to realize the assets that students have first, and then try to remediate the gaps; thus starting from a point of strength and with a can-do philosophy. One way this can be accomplished is by helping students overcome the language barrier.

To overcome the language barrier, first, teachers should encourage students to be active participants in class because the more they use a language, the faster they will learn it. Designing interactive lessons (student to teacher interaction, as well as student to student) and making cooperative group activities part of the class gives students the chance to develop language and strengthen their vocabulary in a natural and nonjudgmental way. It also helps them share ideas based on their background knowledge with the support of peers.

Second, lowering the affective filter in class is also an important way to encourage students to demonstrate their knowledge, previous experiences, and skills. In a stress-free environment, students can use the language with the understanding that everyone makes mistakes and that the class is the right place to make those mistakes and learn. Scaffolding techniques, rephrasing, and restating can help develop students' self-confidence and encourage them to become active participants. In this sense, Garcia (1992) discussed the concept of communicative competence, "the features of language, the interaction patterns necessary to participate in a variety of roles" (p. 57), along with the cultural knowledge. Individuals acquire this competence from the language and culture surrounding them. Garcia also

explained that when students, parents, and teachers have all grown up in the same community, they share the same communicative competence. When children come to school with communicative competency similar to those of their teachers, they have a better chance of succeeding. That is not the case with immigrant students, so teachers should help students develop this competence.

2. Utilize Students' Network System

Teachers should encourage students to utilize the network system that they have outside the school. This network system consists of friends who are more fluent in English, parents or relatives who are literate in other languages, and older siblings. Teachers should try to be familiar with students' family members so that they can remind students of the uncle that is an engineer who can help them with chemistry, or of their father who is a doctor and can pitch in for biology related concepts—even if it is in a different language. Teachers could also invite those relatives to class as guest speakers.

In terms of friends, teachers could encourage and facilitate students' get-togethers with a study-buddy, whether it is in their own room for a 30-minute tutoring session after school or a quick reminder to meet over the weekend to prepare for the coming test. Teachers can also assign mentors for some students that show potential and/or utilize the National Honor Society services to help tutor the students. Similar ideas were documented by Cieslinski (2007) who found that the parents did not help their children with homework because they did not know how to connect between the home and school learning. However, older siblings and relatives pitched in to help children with their school work.

3. Believe in a Bright Future

Another step that teachers can take is to help students realize that their aspirations and their parents' dreams of bright futures and college educations are possible. In my study, all parents stated emphatically that what mattered most to them was that their children attained high education. Similarly, students realized the high expectations their parents had for them, and thus they were motivated to become high achievers and yearned

to attain college degrees. Teachers can capitalize on this in the following ways: First, at the high school level, teachers can recognize the academic strengths of students and draw their attention to a certain career path or college major. Second, based also on students' academic strengths and interests, teachers can challenge students to take honors classes, advanced placement classes, or dual-enrollment classes. If students have solid understanding of the content matter, then language should not prevent them from being in those classes. Third, teachers can discuss with students the events, extracurricular activities, and clubs that are available at school so that they stay connected with what is going on and join them when they are ready. Being part of the school culture can help motivate students and develop their skills, as extracurricular life is as important as academic achievement in building relationships, skills, and motivation. Kelly (2012) reflected that students who were limited in English and enrolled in a self-contained ESL classroom during the day were also able to contribute and enrich a school-wide project about bullying by building on their knowledge.

4. Friends are There for a Reason

In the study, students reported learning both independently and collaboratively. Even their collaborative learning was somewhat independent in that they initiated and conducted their own study sessions with friends. As teachers notice this kind of motivation in students, they should encourage and help their students seek more support from friends when they struggle. In addition, and when available, teachers can encourage students to take advantage of before or after-school tutoring or seeking the teacher's help before or after class.

5. A Cultural Understanding

Within the cultural aspect, two points are of utmost importance: behavioral expectations and peer influences. First, teachers should expect good behavior from students. Since behavior is emphasized at home and students rise to their parents' expectations of being good, teachers can have high expectations related to behavior and respect. Teachers can also count on parents for support if behavioral issues arise at school.

Second, since parents believed that children can sometimes be negatively influenced by their peers, teachers need to be careful when making decisions about socialization, even for academic reasons such as studying. Teachers should try, when possible, to base their decisions on standards for behavior. Socializing outside of family and religious events, particularly without family supervision, was just not in these parents' schema of what "good" children did, and thus not a stepping stone on their roads to academic success. To make up for that, parents sustained tight relationships with extended family members which worked as an anchor in the children's lives and provided the social capital. Therefore, teachers have to be cautious about how they group students, whether for in class activities or outside the school.

In her research about Pueblo Native American students, Fayden (2004) found that the process of becoming literate was a process of negotiation of what students thought at a particular point in time (i.e. what they bring with them) and of what a particular culture told them (i.e. the facts they learn at school). Hence, a cultural understanding on the teachers' part helps them incorporate the students' culture within instruction. If teachers take part in the social activities and/or celebrations of their students, they can bring this culture to class whether to facilitate instruction or to plan for culturally-related activities. This has been demonstrated time and again in the research. Hall and Piazza (2009) remarked that African American boys' interpretations of texts were influenced by the students' social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and experiences. Honeyford (2010) also explored the results of incorporating lesson plans that recognized and invited students' cultures into the classroom and found that students' writing samples included representations of larger networks of people, activities, and things that extended to include the past, present and future along with an appreciation and pride for their community, families, and themselves—practices which reflected their cultural identity.

Thus, when teachers have an understanding of the home cultures of students, they can develop insight on students' home literacy practices and use this knowledge to the advantage of students.

6. Involve Parents with Homework and Stay Connected

Creating environments conducive to learning at home, particularly completing homework, was found to be very important from the parents' perspectives and has also been proven effective in research (Kelly, 2012; Rodriguez, 2008). These environments were characterized by uninterrupted study time, limited TV, and no burdens with chores. All of this is a dedication on the parents' side to free their children and provide them with an opportunity to succeed. Hence, teachers can capitalize on this support from parents and plan homework or projects that involve the collaboration between parents and children which mirrors the environment that parents try to create at home. Teachers can also use technology to reach parents. *Remind*, *Myriad*, and other apps can help them stay connected.

On the other hand, teachers can be assured that there are no excuses if students lag behind in their work since achievement is a priority at home. Similarly, when teachers realize the supportive home environment, they can seek to communicate with parents if any academic concerns arise knowing that they will receive support by them.

Hence, the more teachers understand their students' cultures and build bridges with homes and families, the more they can connect with students and tap into the hidden capitals that students have.

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