

# Supporting Transnational Families

Eun Kyeong Cho, Dora W. Chen, and Sunghee Shin

Soon I will have a new child in my classroom. Jingsong arrived here in the United States from China only two weeks ago. He is 4 years old and does not speak English. His father, who came a year ago to pursue graduate studies, can read English but is limited in his communication abilities. Jingsong's mother is still in China, working and taking care of Jingsong's grandparents.

His parents debated whether Jingsong should stay in China with his mother and be cared for by his grandparents when she is at work. But they wanted him to learn English and they thought there was no better way than to enroll him in a preschool in America. Jingsong's mother wants to stay involved in Jingsong's life, of course, and the family is trying to figure out how to manage that.

Jingsong's father does not speak fluent English, Jingsong does not speak any English, and his mother lives in China. I will be this child's first teacher in his new country, and I do not know where to start.

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**A**n increasing number of teachers encounter situations like this today. Gonzalez-Mena points out that “a program can’t educate or care for the child without taking the family into consideration” (2008, 192). Furthermore, according to a national parent survey, “parents who are single, separated, or divorced are more likely than others to identify input from professionals as a major influence on parenting” (Zero to Three 2010, 2).

It is important for teachers to support families that do not live together, no matter what the reason. This article focuses on transnational families—those from another country, with some family members living in the United States while other family members remain in the homeland—and shares practical ideas for early childhood teachers.

## What is a transnational family?

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Depending on their culture, some define the family as the group of people in the nuclear family; others adopt a broader definition that includes the extended family. Here, the term *family* includes both nuclear and extended families. Transnational families adopt separate living arrangements in two or more countries but retain close links with their homeland (Ho 2002; Schmalzbauer 2004). Due in large part to global capitalism, this type of living arrangement has become increasingly common around the world (Schmalzbauer 2004; Birdal 2005; Huang, Yeoh, & Lam 2008; Spring 2008).

**Transnational families adopt separate living arrangements in two or more countries but retain close links with their homeland.**

While a transnational family from another country is similar to an immigrant family in that they have both crossed international borders, the key difference lies in the *separation of the family* across borders. Transnational families face many of the same challenges as immigrant families—adapting to a new culture, learning a new language, locating suitable and affordable housing, seeking jobs, and adjusting to the educational and larger societal systems. In addition, they have to deal with family separation.

What is unique about transnational families is the disconcerting reality of family separation coupled with the desire to maintain family ties (Sørensen 2005; Ramirez, Skrbis, & Emmison 2007; Cho & Shin 2008). Short- and long-term separations affect the relationship of married couples and the development of young children growing up with one parent or neither parent. They also affect parent-child relationships both during the period of separation and after reunification. Separated family members want to be involved in family matters, including their children's education, but it may not be easy due to geographic distance, limited financial resources, and other challenges, such as limited means of communication and lack of transportation and time.



ration is voluntary or not, various intricately intertwined factors are involved, and the process cannot be explained by a single factor.

Teachers with a child from a transnational family in the class can offer more effective support if they understand more about the family's circumstances. To provide some context, we look at three groups of transnational families—families separated for political, economic, and educational reasons—in “Facts for Teachers about Transnational Families” (p. 32).

Recognizing the potential impact of this growing social phenomenon on families, schools, communities, and most important, children, researchers from various disciplines have focused their work on transnational families (Schmalzbauer 2004; Birdal 2005; Parreñas 2005; Huang, Yeoh, & Lam 2008; Wilding & Baldasser 2009; Song 2010). How can teachers support these separated families? How can we strengthen family ties and work closely with the families, including family members living outside the United States?

### Teacher strategies for working with transnational families

#### What should teachers know?

Families adopt transnational living arrangements for various reasons: some families are separated during the immigration process; others are separated because an adult is working or studying in the United States. Some families are reunited in a matter of months; others not for years. Some children are separated from one parent; others are separated from both. Some families are separated by choice; others by forces beyond their control. Whether the sepa-

ration is voluntary or not, various intricately intertwined factors are involved, and the process cannot be explained by a single factor. Awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of transnational families are the foundation for building the knowledge and skills needed to support families. Here are some teacher-tested strategies.

#### Embrace a multifaceted role

According to a guide for teachers (Lucey et al. 2000), teachers take on multifaceted roles in their work with refugee students. These roles are relevant also for early

# Facts for Teachers about Transnational Families

Transnational families separate for various reasons—among them, politics, economic need, and education. Here is some basic information about each.

## Families separated for political reasons

Political reasons include civil or religious war and dissatisfaction with policies or politics. One distinctive type of transnational family affected by political factors is the refugee family. A strong social network is needed for successful adjustment during the post-migration period.

Children in most refugee families

- may arrive with limited formal education or interrupted schooling and little command of English
- may have had traumatic experiences in fleeing their country, compounded for young children by an inability to manage and verbalize their feelings, which may lead to serious psychiatric disorders in some (see Barowsky & McIntyre 2010)

Most political refugees have limited access to assets. Their major challenges are adapting culturally, psychosocially, and academically to American society and schools. They also have identity problems, experiencing confusion as a result of the shift from being

- a boss to being an employee
- a skilled professional to being unemployed
- an adult, citizen, and member to being “alien,” an outsider
- a confident caregiver to being a vulnerable adult, dependent on children as translators (Lucey et al. 2000)

As of 2008,

- there were 15.2 million refugees around the world
- the United States resettled about 60,000 refugees, 80 percent of whom were women and children
- the largest numbers of resettled refugees in the United States were from Burma (18,139) and Iraq (13,823)
- California and Texas had the largest number of resettled refugees

## Families separated due to economic factors

In some families separated for financial reasons, a family member is a dispatched employee, assigned to work at the company's U.S. branch. In others, family members are migrant workers, including farm workers, domestic laborers, and workers in the fishing, meat-packing, and dairy industries.

Key features of migrant farm workers:

- One to 3 million leave their homes annually to work in the United States
- Five out of 6 are native Spanish speakers
- Their high school graduation rate is 50.7 percent
- Problems include poor physical health, higher infant mortality rate, shorter life expectancy, and exclusion from employee benefits mandated by state labor laws (e.g., disability insurance, overtime pay, collective bargaining)
- Most earn far below the U.S. poverty level
- Their children's education is affected by discontinuity and inconsistency resulting from frequent moves to parents' worksites

For most migrant worker families,

- parents may have limited English and some may be illiterate
- living conditions are poor (trailer parks or housing with safety hazards)
- major concerns may be personal and include family safety and job security
- their children have interrupted schooling, and a limited command of English is common
- at least one-third of the children help in the fields, which limits the time for schoolwork and social gatherings

*Sources:* Content adapted from Migration Policy Institute (see Batalova 2009), International Institute of Boston and Immigration and Refugee Services of America (see Lucey et al. 2000), and BOCES Geneseo Migrant Center.

## Families separated in pursuit of education

In some countries, education is considered a critical factor for future success. Thus, many who can afford it decide to sacrifice life at home to provide a better learning environment and social capital for their children (or themselves) in foreign countries like the United States (Huang & Yeoh 2005; Cho & Shin 2008; Cho & Abramovich in press). This is often true for Asian families. In Korea, this type of family is called a *goose family*. (Like male geese, who make ideal mates and fathers, the fathers in goose families sacrifice family life for the benefit of the children.)

Key features of goose families:

- Married couples are separated for the sake of their children's education. Because children need parental support and supervision, in most cases, mothers accompany children abroad while fathers stay in the home country.
- Most goose fathers are highly educated, with high household income and strong aspirations for their children; most goose mothers can communicate in English.
- The primary goal is to provide children with high-quality educational opportunities and English as a way of gaining social capital.
- The main reason for separation is children's education; thus, parents are deeply involved in education-related matters both at home and at school.

For most goose families, children's academic achievement and improvement in English are major concerns. Fathers in the home country send money overseas to provide financial support and occasionally visit their family members abroad. Despite their voluntary separation, goose families struggle to adjust culturally and psychosocially to a new environment.

childhood teachers who work with transnational families. Teachers can be more effective when they are

- good listeners who pay careful attention to the experiences, difficulties, feelings, and concerns of transnational families;
- mediators between cultures, helping the child and family members understand the new social, institutional, and environmental demands;
- providers of information, informing families about available community resources;
- facilitators who provide a responsive classroom conducive to problem solving and learning; and
- nurturers who maintain a safe and secure environment in which children learn and grow and all families feel welcome. (Lucey et al. 2000, 15)

We also recommend that teachers be advocates who help the child and family understand and stand up for their rights.

**To work around language differences, teachers may send home communications translated into the family's home language.**

### Build knowledge about the child and family

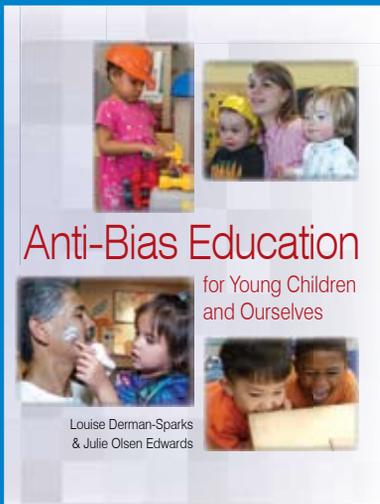
To effectively provide support for the children and their families, Gonzalez-Mena proposes that teachers stop “operating out of unconscious systems,” suspend judgment, and be open-minded in seeking an understanding of different perspectives (2007, 3). As with most parents, refugee mothers

and migrant worker fathers want the best for their children; but due to the multiple layers of challenges such adults face, their children's education may not be their first priority. For some transnational families, these challenges center on basic needs, such as economic survival, finding a job while learning how to communicate in English, and finding a place to stay. When teachers have more vital information about the children and families they serve, they can try to locate appropriate resources for them. For example,

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## Three Transnational Families

**A transnational mother** and her 5-year-old daughter live in New York City; her husband lives in China. The mother has no computer or Internet access at home. The daughter's teacher helps the family get a public library card and create an e-mail account so the mother can use the computers at the neighborhood library to keep in touch with her husband and other family members. Soon the mother takes her daughter to the library at least once a week. By reading and responding to her father's e-mails, the daughter retains her home language while learning English.

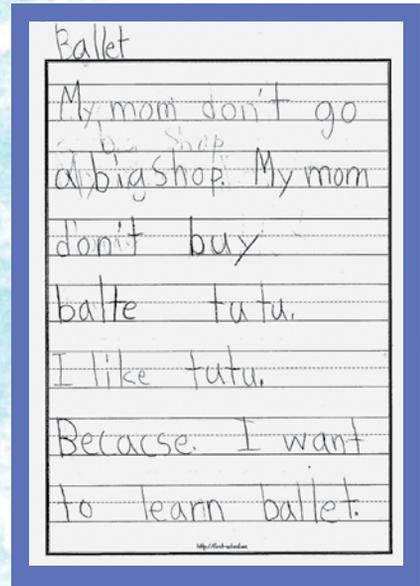
**A mother from Korea** is a graduate student with two daughters. Her younger daughter's preschool teacher communicates actively with the mother. When the teacher learns that the child's father has been assigned to work in Iraq, she suggests that the mother scan the child's writing and artwork and burn them onto a CD to send to her husband.

With the teacher's help, the mother collects, scans, and sends her two daughters' written work and drawings.

She even sends video clips of the girls dancing and singing. The father in Iraq feels like he is part of the girls' lives, even from thousands of miles away. Sharing the joy of watching the children grow supports the family and keeps them connected.



**When a father** is assigned to his company's U.S. branch, the 4-year-old son comes with his parents to the United States. Soon after they arrive, the father is reassigned to a branch in Eastern Europe. However, because of political uncertainties there, the mother and son remain in the United States in an unfamiliar city.



The boy's teacher tells the mother about an Asian store that sells inexpensive international calling cards that will help keep down the cost of long calls. The teacher also tells the mother that there are two other international families in the center. From those families, the mother learns how to use Internet Messenger and a Webcam. Setting a special time to talk every week helps the father overcome the seven-hour time difference.

to work around language differences, teachers may send home communications translated into the family's home language. When a transnational parent is illiterate, teachers can look for someone who can translate verbally.

When center directors and teachers have a new child from a transnational family, the following information is helpful:

- Family's home country and home language
- Child and family experiences in the home country and here, such as witnessing killings in a war or feeling frustration, alienation, or lack of trust in schools
- Family goals—how and why the family came to the United States
- Family challenges and needs in terms of political, economic, educational, and other sociocultural factors—need for an interpreter, food, shelter, employment, a driver's license, transportation, ESL (English as a second language) classes, psychological counseling, a social network, and more
- Cultural and educational beliefs and values of the family and of their country of origin
- Literacy level of the child in the home language and in English
- What each family wants for their child from school
- Child's previous schooling and academic level
- Curriculum/textbooks/program approaches used if the child previously attended a U.S. center or school
- How the family communicates with family members in their home country

## Identify community resources

Resources available in the community include people, materials, services, and social networks. There are a range of people in most communities who can support and assist teachers or transnational families:

- People who speak the family's home language
- People who can provide information about the culture, traditions, values, practices, and education system of the family's country of origin
- Teachers or community workers who have had experience working with transnational families

Consider resources, services, and social networks in the community that are helpful to individual families. Is there a place in the community where the family's cultural group is more visible, such as a religious congregation (for example,

church, temple, mosque) or ethnic store? Does the cultural group have regular gatherings? Is there a group or an organization, for example, a refugee settlement center, that coordinates services for families in similar circumstances? Think about joining a Listserv for a local ESL network. Become informed about—and let the families know of—these available resources. The families will then be able to get necessary information and help from people who have been through similar challenges or who have experience in helping transnational families.

If there are other transnational families in the community, center directors can organize support group sessions so the families can offer mutual support, exchange information, and share social occasions. Barowsky and McIntyre (2010) suggest that it is critical for refugee families to have a strong social network so they know that they are

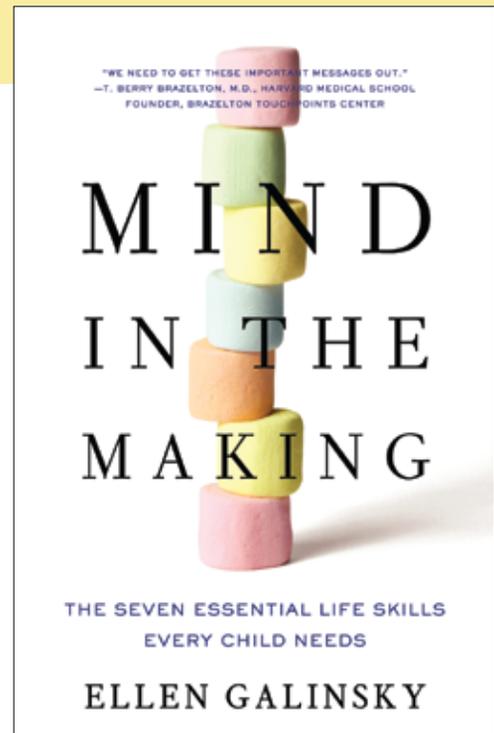
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not alone and that other families are dealing with similar challenges. Social networks are critical for transnational migrant families as well.

### **Involve both parents or key family members in communication**

When families are separated across borders, teachers may see only a child's father or mother—or neither parent—during school events and meetings. Teachers can overcome the geographic challenges by finding alternative ways to communicate with family members about the child's school life, learning, and development. Using technology and community resources, teachers can reach out to all family members and provide families with ways to stay connected. Writing e-mails, burning CDs, and communicating via international phone cards, Internet Messenger, and Webcams are some teacher-tested ideas (see "Three Transnational Families," p. 34).

Today's era of advanced technologies in communication and transportation has made transnational living arrangements possible (Birdal 2005; Wilding 2006). Yet, staying connected remains a major hurdle. For those without ready access to electronic technology, it is an even bigger problem. When teachers use and offer creative ideas, like the ones that follow, transnational families feel more connected and included:

- Send home electronic and hard copies of children's work samples and photos of classroom and school activities that represent the children's school experiences. Include notes explaining the context of the activities.

### **Using technology and community resources, teachers can reach out to all family members and provide families with ways to stay connected.**

- Make a second copy of progress reports and other relevant documents when possible to facilitate sharing with the parent who is abroad.
- Weave modes of communication into the curriculum: involve all the children in mailing the documents to the overseas address and sending e-mails from classroom computers, using the exchange of information to promote learning of key content standards in meaningful and relevant ways.
- Use community members as interpreters and translators for parent meetings and for notes, newsletters, and other school documents for transnational families. Seek help from other communities, if needed.

Some possible ways to locate international members of a community include the following:

- Contact area colleges with an office for international students and international student organizations; they can provide referrals and resources for support networks.
- Contact cultural societies, which can give teachers useful information about cultures, beliefs, values, and practices, as well as calendars of events for social networking activities.
- Search online for various cultural societies, national nonprofit organizations, and related state agencies in major cities in states (like New York, California, and Texas) where particular immigrant groups are more visible and have good support infrastructures. Useful documents are available online, as well.

### **Conclusion**

With the world already a global village, early childhood teachers are developing greater understanding



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of differences in values, beliefs, and practices (related to education and our role as educators of young children) and of children and families from other countries. Teachers are increasingly aware of and sensitive to children's diverse backgrounds and experiences. Respect for the unique experiences, needs, and challenges of transnational families is a prerequisite for gaining knowledge and skills for working with them and being a more effective supporter and advocate.

Emotional, psychological, and financial costs are inherent in the separated living arrangements of transnational families (Huang, Yeoh, & Lam 2008). Parents want to support their children to the best of their ability; however, cultural, linguistic, economic, and other barriers may limit their ability to do so. When teachers do not adequately understand and address transnational families' challenges, the families cannot fully and actively participate in their children's education. Effective early educators value families as equal partners in children's education. They actively seek and invent ways to involve and maintain open, two-way communication to support, build, maintain, and strengthen the home-school relationship, regardless of geographic distance.

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