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# Broadening Support for Asian American and Pacific Islander Immigrant Families:

## The Role and Impact of Community-based Organizations in Family-Community-School Partnerships

Nga-Wing Anjela Wong

### Summary

Children of immigrants are the fastest-growing population in the United States; therefore addressing their needs has become an important issue that faces educators, researchers, and policy makers nationwide. This policy brief examines the services and support for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) families during nonschool hours. Specifically, I illustrate the role and impact of a community-based organization (CBO) in family-community-school partnerships and how CBOs provide information, support, and advocacy for low-income Chinese immigrant families.

### Background and Context

Currently in the United States, 16.5 million children under the age of eighteen are children of immigrants<sup>1</sup> (Fortuny, 2010), and they are the fastest-growing population in the United States (Mather, 2009). Addressing their needs has become an important issue that faces educators, researchers, and policy makers nationwide. Children of immigrants, the majority of whom are of Asian and Latina/o origin, face special challenges as they negotiate between “multiple worlds” (Phelan, Davidson, and Yu, 1998). For instance, scholars have noted that they often experience academic, social, and emotional difficulties (Li, 2003; Olsen, 1997; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Wong, 2008, 2010). Research also has shown that students of color perceive a lack of “authentic caring” in schools and students of color view these in-

stitutions as a space of “subtractive schooling” whereby schools are structured in ways that subtract students’ cultures, identities, and languages because their differences are considered of less value (Valenzuela, 1999). As I have noted, “out-of-school time (OST) programs attempt to ameliorate this institutional deficiency by providing students of color with support programs and services” (2008, 181).

In this research brief, I consider the role of CBOs, a form of OST program, as critical partners in bridging family and school. OST settings offer a unique context, and as Irby, Pittman, and Tolman remind us, “schools are only one of a range of learning environments that share responsibility for helping students learn and achieve mastery . . . community-based organizations are also themselves settings for learning and engagement” (2003, 18–19). Although the research literature on OST programs is growing, few studies have examined qualitatively what these programs do and how they support the youth who participate. Even fewer studies focus on the specific needs of youth from low-income and working-class immigrant families. Using a case study, I illustrate how a CBO assists low-income first-, 1.5- (or those who came to the United States as young children), and second-generation Chinese American youth and their families with advocacy, information, and support (Wong, 2008, 2010, under review). More specifically, I examine the services and support it provides during nonschool hours that assist Asian American youth in mediating their multiple worlds.

### Methodology and Framework

The data draws from an ethnographic research at the Harborview Chinatown Community Center (HCCC), a CBO in an East Coast city I call Harborview, and its youth program, Community Youth Center (CYC). HCCC, the largest Asian American social service provider in the state, is a multiservice 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization located in the heart of Chinatown that began during the late 1960s as a grassroots community effort. Opened in 1995, CYC offers college preparatory and English as a Second Language classes, leadership skills building, social recreational activities, and volunteer-run academic tutoring.<sup>2</sup> The primary forms of data collection were conducted in 2004 and from 2006 to 2007 and consisted of participant observations, document analysis, and in-depth interviews with thirty-eight youth, fourteen parents, and nine HCCC staff members.

I employ Yosso's (2005) "community cultural wealth" framework to argue that HCCC helps low-income Chinese immigrant families negotiate and navigate their multiple worlds. The community cultural wealth framework consists of at least six forms of capital that are often overlooked by schools and other institutions: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. "These various forms of capital," as Yosso states, "are not mutually exclusive or static, but rather are dynamic processes that build on one another as part of community cultural wealth" (2005, 77). Rather than using a top-down hierarchical model and cultural deficit framework (i.e., perceiving difference as a deficit and thus placing the blame on families and communities for inadequacies), HCCC acknowledges the importance of implementing a cultural wealth model in serving the community (Wong, 2008, 2010, under review). Although it is crucial to provide the codes needed to access and navigate U.S. society, it is equally important to honor and uphold the families' cultural wealth, which HCCC has been doing for forty-plus years.

## Findings

### **"Asian Pride": Providing a Sense of Ethnic and Racial Identity**

Schools for these Asian American youth are places that take their cultural identities away in order to make them conform and assimilate to the school's dominant culture. Consequently, the youth hide their identities and thus are silenced. CYC provides them with not just a place but also a space where they can express their "Asian Pride"; these youth are free from the racial hegemony of the dominant culture. For example, Steven, a 1.5-generation youth, was able to speak Cantonese comfortably at CYC but not at school because "people make fun of us [for speaking Cantonese]." CYC therefore serves as a "culturally relevant" (Ladson-Billings, 1994) space for participating youth and their immigrant families.

### **"All they see is the pressure": Providing a Sense of Being a Teenager**

In many immigrant families, role reversal between immigrant parents and their children is extremely common when the children assist their parents in a new society (Hune and Takeuchi, 2008; Kibria, 1993; Lee and Kumashiro, 2005; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Immigrant parents depend on their children

to help them negotiate and navigate the outside world (i.e., the United States) because their children often come into contact with U.S. American<sup>3</sup> culture sooner than they do. As a result, “they are learning things that most American kids don’t even know until they get to college and some of them even later,” remarked Jeff, a youth worker. “All they see is the pressure [their parents face]. And the negative is, you know, in terms of growing up as a teenager, you have to grow a lot faster.” Therefore, for these youth, CYC is a place where they could be teenagers and have a sense of community. In doing so, CYC provides a supportive space between the youths’ multiple worlds.

**“We can’t help them anymore”:  
Immigrant Parents and the U.S. School System**

Immigrant families from low-income backgrounds frequently struggle with negotiating the U.S. school system because of limited access to institutional support and dominant social capital (Lew, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999; Wong, 2008). Lew (2006) and Stanton-Salazar’s (2001) notions of class and social capital can be applied here to understand how the school system is an example of a stratified structure that places low-income immigrants of color in the margins. The families in this research noted not knowing how the U.S. school system worked; as a result, they were unable to assist and advocate for their child. Essentially, they felt ignored by the school system. Moreover, similar to other studies (Advocates for Children, 2004; Valdés, 1996), immigrant parents routinely feel uncomfortable going to their children’s schools due to language and cultural differences. However, parents did attend school events during their children’s elementary school years because multicultural and bilingual services were available (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Wong, 2008).

CBOs can bridge the disconnections and tensions for immigrant families. The families in my research were able to find the advocacy, information, and support from HCCC through workshops and one-on-one relationships. By using a cultural sensitivity approach, rather than a cultural deficit approach of blaming the family, the parents viewed HCCC to be helpful. Additionally, “by maintaining an ongoing communication with the youth and their families, CYC is viewed as a visible resource because the staff are connected with the community and had often acquired the infor-

mation, skills, and social capital to successfully negotiate the dominant society” (Wong, 2008, 193).

### Recommendations

CBOs can be extremely beneficial and validating for students from low-income and working-class (immigrant) families. What makes HCCC important and successful is that it has a culturally relevant understanding of the community that it serves (Wong, 2008). Youth and families who identified the United States as difficult to navigate and negotiate, find the services and support at CBOs, like HCCC, valuable because the CBO understands and acknowledges their family background. Instead of viewing the Chinese American youth and their families as deficient, HCCC acknowledges their cultural wealth and serves as a bridge and resource for the community.

This research has sought to broaden the current and narrow home-school relationship paradigm by including the community, as represented by CBOs, as another pivotal player in the discussion. Implementing and retaining culturally relevant OST programs can assist in strengthening the partnerships between schools and Asian Americans, immigrants, and other communities of color. We also need more collaborative research, practices, and policies between family-community-school partnerships in order to better serve our students. Accordingly, I make the following recommendations:

#### **For Policy Makers**

- Provide additional and continual funding opportunities for CBOs and other OST programs to maintain their work and where necessary expand to meet the growing need. An increase in resources during OST would better serve our children and youth because they spend only 20 percent of their time in school (Miller, 2003). For instance, provide funding to those that encourage and practice culturally relevant family-community-school partnerships.

#### **For Education Advocates and School Personnel**

- Understand that no single entity (e.g., family, school, or community) can improve our educational system alone; instead work to ensure that a dialogical and collaborative approach, which also includes the voices of our children and youth, is implemented in order to better serve them.

- Recognize that CBOs have much to offer our educational systems and can play an important role in the board effort to educate our children and youth. Their capacity to develop and maintain culturally relevant and culturally competent services is often in stark contrast to many of our schools. Support their community-based educational workshops and programs that inform immigrant families about the United States and U.S. schools, bridge cultural and generational differences within families, and provide a space for middle and high school Asian American youth during OST.
- Implement policies and procedures that encourage and allow family-community-school partnerships to occur and are where a continual and effective agenda is maintained among all groups. As other scholars have suggested, we need to start “blurring school and community boundaries” (Irby, Pittman, and Tolman, 2003). In doing so, school and community programs are able to support and utilize each other as a resource, and each other’s work would be enhanced. For instance, implement a local and national network for school personnel and youth and community workers. Rather than viewing the school and community as two separate worlds, immigrant families are then able to feel a sense of unity with the institutions that serve their children.
- Create opportunities for partnerships among higher education, school districts, and CBOs. In doing so, the relationship between schools and communities are more cooperative and transparent, rather than working on assumptions, hierarchical order, and competitiveness. For instance, support policies and practices that bring together researchers, teacher educators, school personnel, and youth workers.

### **For Researchers**

- Further research is needed to include other CBOs and OST programs and that examine different identities and contexts (e.g., race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, gender, age, language, and region). Comparative and longitudinal studies of different OST programming would capture these identities and contexts.
- All research should honor and work to benefit the community, particularly communities of color that are often marginalized or invisible in academia and the dominant society.

- Recognize the dangers of utilizing the term *giving voice* in policy, practice, and research, because it assumes that the “oppressed” (Freire, 1999) do not have a voice and, thus, they must be given permission by an authority (e.g., a researcher) to speak. If researchers are holding to such a belief and mentality then we, too, are guilty of perpetuating oppressive ideology and practices. Rather than giving voice, I “amplify” (Diniz-Pereira, 2005) the voices (e.g., the individuals and communities I collaborate with) that are too often unheard, marginalized, and ignored by the systems and structures that hold inequality in place.<sup>4</sup>

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## Notes

1. The term *children of immigrants* refers to both U.S.-born (i.e., second generation) and foreign-born (i.e., the first and 1.5 generation) children, and although there are differences in their experiences, “they nevertheless share an important common denominator: immigrant parents” (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2001, 1).
2. Please see Wong (2008, under review) for more details about CYC’s programs and services.
3. I use the term “U.S. American” to refer to individuals from the U.S.A. because “[t]he common usage of “American” as referring to only people of the U.S. is inaccurate and problematic because America includes the entire Western Hemisphere” (Kishimoto and Mwangi, 2009).
4. For more details, please see Wong (2008, 2010, under review).

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