wake up and smell the demographics

Leadership is vision and action

by Luis A. Hernandez

We hear different languages at the supermarket. We notice the multi-ethnic workforce at the local hospital. New members at church are from different parts of the world. The first family from Asia has moved to the neighborhood. The children at the center are now more diverse from five years ago.

New people, new languages, and new cultures are now part of most American cities, suburbs, and towns. It is a demographic change impacting the country in ways we have not experienced in generations. It is about the dynamic of change and the forces of new immigration in our classrooms, communities, and nation. And, as is often noted, if you want to see the future face of America, visit a preschool classroom today.

Luis A. Hernandez, T/TAS Early Childhood Education Specialist, holds an MA in Bilingual/Multicultural education from the University of San Francisco. He is active in a number of national organizations that support children and family interests. At NAEYC, he is active in the new accreditation process, and developing professional and leadership development opportunities. He currently serves on the Board of the Parent Services Project in California, the Advisory Board of the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, and the United Way's Center for Excellence in Early Childhood. He has served on the Boards of the Florida Children's Forum, the Child Care Workforce, and NACCRRA, the Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. A regular speaker at national, state, and local conferences, his special interests include early literacy, second language learning, collaboration and partnerships, changing demographics and diversity, adult learning, and ECE management topics.

Early childhood centers are likely the places of first impressions and contact between us and 'them,' between what is familiar, regular, and comfortable, and the different languages and cultures new immigrants bring to communities. This initial exchange is about discovering differences and similarities, and it is about the dynamics of change. In response to these changes, leaders in ECE settings build an awareness, understanding, and intentional action about how one center or program can be a place of cooperation and community in the midst of unknown change for the children, their families, and staff.

Forward-looking leaders will work to convey the reasons for these demographic shifts. From a place of genuine understanding, they begin to create a vision for their program to equally serve all children and families with respect and purpose. They will wear a new Leadership Hat — Ambassador At Large — between languages, cultures, and societal norms. And they will provide practical ideas in a spirit where everyone can be part of this ever-developing community identity.

Understating demographic shifts

A starting point in understanding demographics and immigration is the personal reflection and histories of staff and families. Begin by engaging folks in sharing the history of their families in our country. How far back do you know your family history? When did they come? How did they come? Why did they come? Each individual historical journey is the beginning of an examination of the American experience. The stories of Irish immigrants following the potato famine, the struggle of Italian immigrants, the cold winters of Scandinavian farmers in the Midwest, the forced and sad journey of African slaves, the freedom to worship when Pilgrims arrived in our nation's beginning, all of these stories have contributed to the complexity of America's culture. In addition, the conversation will be enhanced by tracing the history of Native Americans and their struggles in welcoming and accepting the overwhelming numbers of new populations.

These stories provide a common framework by which the pursuit of religious freedom, economic opportunities, political rights, and forced assimilation creates an American identity. An historical example is that between 1897 and

1938, a wave of immigration changed the face of America. More than 100 million citizens in the United States today, one-third of our total population, can trace their ancestry to an immigrant who landed at New York's Ellis Island (Snag Films, 2002).

From this historical foundation, we begin to broaden the commonalities and parallels for all. Connecting how new immigrant groups seek the same freedoms that our forbearers did — economic, political, religious, and social opportunities and rights. New immigrant families will find success as they and their children create a new life in America and make their contributions as other groups did before them. They will also experience work, social, and educational struggles similar to many of our ancestors — as well as the bias, prejudice, and violence experienced by other groups. While some like a sanitized and romantic view of the past, coming and settling in America was not, and is not, always an easy process for immigrants. Still, our nation is built on the dreams and labor of generations of people who persevered.

I was the son of an immigrant. I experienced bigotry, intolerance and prejudice, even as so many of you have. Instead of allowing these things to embitter me, I took them as spurs to more strenuous effort.
— Andre Bernard Buruch

The power of stories and numbers

By sharing personal stories, quotes, photos, and other rich anecdotal published accounts, storytelling provides a human and personal element to American history. Personal stories become real in broadening understanding, a window to the past that sheds light on the present. Ask staff and families to share and reflect on the history of their families here. You may find people with Native American backgrounds, a descendent from the Mayflower, a sharecropper from Alabama, or someone who is first generation from Japan. It is also a good exercise in getting acquainted at a deeper level as a 'community of learners' evolves in our centers, with the common understanding that we all have a history.

As important as our stories are, our conversations must be informed by facts, data, and statistics. This means conducting research on local, state, and national perspectives on changing immigration patterns. By checking local libraries, newspaper archives, state reports, and relevant web sites, a current analysis can be developed and shared. The more local the information, the more relevant it becomes for those you're trying to reach. A basic knowledge of economics, political situations, and local conditions makes the discussion more tangible and close to home. For example, we know the following national figures:

- In about 28% of all U.S. homes, English is not the primary language. Eighty-four percent (84%) of Head Start programs serve children who speak more than 140 languages at home.
- Hispanics are now 20% of all young children; by 2030 they will represent 25% of that age group.
- The current number of immigrants is about 35 million people; half of that population is Hispanic and one quarter is Asian.
- African Americans are now 13% of the population; Hispanics are now above 15% of the population.
- A number of states — Hawaii, California, Texas — now have a 'minority' majority population.
- Whites will be 47% of the population by 2050.

While numbers and percentages by themselves can be fairly abstract, unsettling, or simplistic, using visuals such as graphs, 'pies,' or maps can make the information manageable and immediate. Generally, current numbers and figures are fairly consistent in giving us future forecasts and trends. As often mentioned, numbers do not lie.

Making sense of change

Often cited references on demographic change are fertility rates across generations. Fertility rates can be an unusual concept to grasp, especially their impact on demographic changes. By a show of hands, ask a group about the number of children that their grandparents had, the number of children that their parents have, and the number of children they have themselves. While 'unscientific,' their responses offer a good indicator of the decreasing number of children from one generation to the next. Extend this conversation by asking at what age the women in each generation had their children and what the educational levels were across the generations. While personal, this will result in a short demographic lesson on fertility, education levels, economics, and generational change.

This conversation on demographics can be extended to the fertility and family educational status of recent immigrants. Immigrants with low education levels will generally have more children and immigrants with higher education levels have fewer children. There is a direct correlation between family income, educational achievement, number of children, and the age of the mothers. This is true for native populations and immigrant groups.

Language and culture

Another point of discussion is the often heated issue of language and culture. With so many families speaking a language other than English, when can we 'expect' them to speak English like the rest of us? While learning and being competent in English is important,

let's keep in mind that for millions of Americans, a home language has been maintained due to religious reasons (Amish), as proof of sovereignty (Native Americans), or as traditions stretching hundreds of years back (Hispanics in the Southwest). As is true to all human groups, language and culture are intertwined in establishing and bolstering identity and sense of community.

The issue is emotional since language and culture can disappear as in the cases of many Native American languages, or it can survive as the French Cajun language and culture of Louisiana. These forces are a dynamic process of perseverance, survival, and adaptation reflected in diverse uses and expressions.

For new immigrants, learning English is a priority for success in our society.

Children will learn English for they are curious and developmentally capable of doing so. For adults, learning a new language can be an arduous process that requires time, preparation, exposure, and motivation. Some adults will always speak with an accent and will not be entirely proficient in English or bi-literate. But all immigrant parents want their children to be competent and successful in school. Part of our responsibility in ECE is to work with families on a common vision for their children's future. Importantly, there is the ethical responsibility to work with families on the cohesiveness of family life and relationships. A key message for these new families is the importance of maintaining and fostering the home language and culture for the benefit of all family members. There is nothing more tragic than immigrant children avoiding communication with their families or feeling ashamed of how their parents lack English skills or speak with an accent.

American ambassadors

Relationships with families new to America is a two-way street; as we learn about them, they learn about us. In becoming acquainted with them, ambassadorial skills come into play. Teachers, directors, and staff may be the initial introduction to American people, English, and our way of life. When we learn about their child-rearing practices, we also demonstrate, interpret, and explain our conduct, procedures, and societal expectations. For example, it will require patience to explain why we have no corporal punishment, why we do not force children to read and write, why we will not spoon-feed their four year old, or why it's a good idea to have a another set of clothes at school so their child can get messy. We also want to emphasize how we view children's development and learning, reasons for the practices in our centers, and the purposes of a curriculum and assessments. Further, we must consider how to best describe the role of teachers in ECE programs, the importance of family involvement and engagement, and the special place that centers have in the lives of all families. Not all exchanges will be joyful encounters; some may be uncomfortable, upsetting, and outside our comfort zone. This can be a steep learning curve.

Keep in mind that ECE is not a fact of life in most of the countries where immigrant families are coming from. Children being cared for by strangers, a 'school setting,' different food, playing outside when it's cold, and painting with shaving cream are all foreign experiences for these parents and children. Building understanding starts with trust and respect, the positive welcome and acceptance of people with a culture, language, and contributions to make. The center is an emerging community with the opportunity to confirm that it takes everyone in this village to raise a child. Meaningful inquiries, curiosity, and exchanges of family life, rituals, music, and food add to an expanded view of the world. It can be a real two-way street of learning and appreciation, without falling into activities that feel and look like cultural 'tourist traps.'

Steps in creating vision

Knowledge, skills, and courage are the ingredients to begin this conversation and the ensuing work. The ECE leader will create a platform for open communication and understanding for the program and its community:

- Begin this process by recognizing families' contributions starting with the value of a strong work ethic. These are the people who pick the strawberries for our breakfast, the nurses in our hospitals, the cleaning crew in the school, and the family running the local market.
- Give credit to their energy and vitality with new ethnic restaurants, businesses, lively rediscovered neighborhoods, and a sense of 'cosmopolitan' communities.
- Applaud their sense of unity in family ties and relationships, 'old fashioned' values, strong sense of faith, and respectful view of children and the elderly.

At the same time, know that these families bring a new set of challenges to the center. While some families may have a professional background with high educational achievement (the new doctor from India), the majority of new immigrants are poor with little educational history and limited or no English skills. Communication with these families will be difficult at times. Be aware of social and political tensions that can result in potential and real conflicts between groups in the community. And it is not helpful when political figures and other commentators entice distrust and hate for new immigrants. A quick analysis tells that immigrants are welcome when

times are good and their numbers do not 'overwhelm' the others. When times are hard and jobs are scarce, immigrants are less welcomed and perceived as 'competition' to others. These tensions are real, and leaders will have the difficult task of unmasking stereotypes, erasing perceived myths, and standing for what is right and just.

The leader at work

Back at the program, the ECE leader recognizes that demographic changes impacting the center need to be addressed to staff and all families.

- Congratulate your sense of collective power to do the right thing for all. The power lies in leading and creating vision for your program as a team.
- Start with practical ends in mind, with sensible ideas and strategies that can work best for your population.
- Always adhere to high standards of quality and service that will guide and position the program to changing demands. Regardless of where parents come from, they universally want the best for their children.

As you assess the needs and issues of new populations, partner with community resources and agencies familiar with the cultures and languages of immigrant groups, and their reasons for immigration. They can provide a broad scope of knowledge and understanding related to the uniqueness of these families. For example, a center might develop a relationship with the human resources office of a car assembly plant employing workers and their families from Asia. The company can facilitate the exchange of ideas, volunteers, and other resources that the center can use in working with the families. A win-win solution for all.

Leading to the future

With the assistance of other like-minded colleagues and community allies, know that the work is an evolving process. It will challenge you to examine and update the program's systems, procedures, and services in working with changing populations. What documents need to be translated? Do we need to hire bilingual staff? How do we formulate a policy on language learning and cultural awareness? It also becomes an issue of fiscal consideration to carry the work. For example, how do you provide expert professional development for members of the Board, staff, and families to advance your goal of cross-cultural understanding? And add to the mix regular monitoring to check on what's working and what needs tweaking. Revisit the cycle of awareness, understanding, and intentional action.

Creating vision and mission is not a task for the faint of heart, body, or spirit. The work is about ongoing good intentions in creating healthy, responsive, and viable communities for all. And as leaders, find the joy and excitement in the responsibility of creating a program that is a community incubator and innovator in serving all families. Demographic change is a new day for us — who we are and who we will be; let your program be awake and ready for a future American community.

Selected resources and references

The Challenges of Change: Center for Law and Social Policy
www.clasp.org

Dinan, K. A. (2006). Young children in immigrant families. NCCP Report. [Online] Available at www.nccp.org/publications

Ellis Island Immigration Museum film www.snagfilms.com/films/watch/face_of_America_the Ellis_Island_Immigration_Museum/

Foundation for Child Development. All our children? [Online] Available www.fcd-us.org

Hsu, H. (2009, January). The end of White America? *The Atlantic.* [Online] Available at www.theatlantic.com

National Center de La Raza. Paying the price: The impact of immi-gration raids. [Online] Available www.nclr.org

Office of Head Start. (2008, February) Dual language learning: What does it take? [Online] Available at http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc

Para Nuestros Ninos: National Task Force on ECE for Hispanics www.ecehispanic.org

Pew Hispanic Center. Hispanic Demographics: www.pewhispanic.org

U.S. Census Bureau. USA quick facts. [Online} Available http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd