

Assessment in early childhood education: threats and challenges to effective assessment of immigrant children

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Research indicates that early childhood professionals gather assessment information to monitor child development and learning, to guide curriculum planning and decision making, to identify children who may have special needs, to report and communicate with others, and to evaluate programmes. A review of literature indicates that immigrant children have low achievement assessment scores as compared with mainstream American children, also immigrant children enter kindergarten already behind their mainstream American peers. The current study explored early childhood teachers' perceptions of assessment measures used with immigrant children and the challenges faced when assessing immigrant children. Findings of the study reveal that there are several factors that make early childhood teachers fail to gather effective assessment information from immigrant children. Unless the factors are addressed, planning for effective curriculum for immigrant children using assessment data will continue to be a challenge for early childhood teachers. Factors that continue to affect gathering effective assessment data from immigrant children include language barriers, cultural clashes, socio-economic factors, and culturally and linguistically biased assessment measures.

Introduction

Assessment is an integral component of teaching and learning in early childhood education. Early childhood assessment is defined as the process of gathering information about children from several forms of evidence, then organising and interpreting that information (McAfee, Leong and Bodrova, 2004; McLean, Wolery and Bailey, 2004). Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1992) defined early childhood assessment as 'the process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting the work children do and how they do it, as a basis for variety of educational decisions that affect the child' (p. 22); in the same vein, Bagnato and Neisworth (1991) notes that early childhood assessment is a flexible, collaborative decision-making process in which teams of parents and professionals repeatedly revise their judgments

and make decisions about children's learning and developmental progress. These definitions suggest that early childhood assessment is a dynamic, ongoing process, which only becomes effective when there is collaboration between parents and early childhood professionals.

Assessment in early childhood education serves different purposes. The most valued purposes of assessment in early childhood education include the following:

- To monitor child development and learning
- To guide curriculum planning and decision making
- To identify children who may have special needs
- To report and communicate with others (e.g., parents, interventionists, and other stakeholders) (Eliason and Jenkins, 2008; Kostelnik, Soderman and Whiren, 2011; McAfee et al., 2004; McLean et al., 2004).

Early childhood education curriculum sets the foundation for future learning and success (American Federation of Teachers, 2002; Young, 1996). The curriculum that supports developmental gains in all the domains such as language, cognitive, social and emotional, and physical development is guided by assessment (NAEYC, 2003). If assessment is not done effectively, it would be difficult to plan successful learning programmes that meet individual children's needs within the different developmental domains. To attain effective assessment information, parents and caregivers have to be fully involved in the assessment process (Ashbourne and Warder, 2010; Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer, 2007; McLean et al., 2004). Early childhood literature and research indicate that assessment of immigrant children does not always lead to the gathering of useful information that guides teachers in the planning of a successful individualised education programme or curriculum (Deiner, 2010; Gargiulo and Kilgo, 2011; NAEYC, 2005). The fact that immigrant children often do not have effective curriculum preparation at early childhood level leads to most immigrant children dropping out before they reach high school (Rong and Preissle, 2009). It is important to note that immigrant children [most of them speak English as a second language (ESL)], referred to as English language learners (ELLs) in schools, are much less likely than mainstream American children to score at or above the state's proficient level in all

state-standardised assessments (Deiner, 2010; Fry, 2008). This could indicate that schools are playing a minimal role in closing the achievement gap between immigrant children and mainstream American children.

Considering the fact that assessment affects students’ progress in meeting curricula goals, it is surprising that very little research focuses on exploring teacher perception of the factors that affect assessment of immigrant children in early childhood education. Many studies that exist today have been done to determine factors that make it difficult to gather assessment data on young children in general (Dichtelmiller and Ensler, 2004). There is a need to document barriers and challenges that current early childhood teachers face in the process of gathering effective assessment data of immigrant children. The documentation of barriers and challenges will help early childhood teacher educators to reflect on how they teach teacher candidates assessment of immigrant children; in addition, teachers will find this study useful as they plan for assessment of immigrant children, and how to improve current assessment processes.

Purpose of the study

The current qualitative study explores early childhood teacher views of factors that lead to assessment of immigrant children not to yield information that guide curricula or lead to the development of a successful individualised education programme. Specifically, this study sought to reveal the challenges that early childhood teachers face when gathering assessment data that guide curriculum and individualised education programmes for immigrant children in kindergarten.

Research questions

The specific research questions this study sought to address include:

1. What assessment measures do early childhood teachers use with young children to guide curriculum?
2. To what extent does the use of such assessments help improve immigrant children’s learning?
3. What challenges do early childhood teachers face in the process of gathering assessment data from immigrant children?

Method

Research design and participants selection

The study used a qualitative approach to explore early childhood teachers’ views of factors or barriers that make it difficult to gather effective assessment data from immigrant children. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants of the study from the sampling frame. Only early childhood teachers were purposefully selected, and a typical sampling approach was further used to select 10 participants. ‘A typical sample would be one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 62). Contact with teachers in a Midwest school district was initiated by way of recruitment letters. Information about

teachers (such as email address, grade level taught, level of education, etc.) was collected from school district websites, which are available for public use. Teachers who indicated their willingness to participate in the study were asked to complete an informed consent form and agree to participate in in-depth interviews.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data for the study were collected from 10 participants by way of semi-structured interviews lasting from one to one-and-a-half hours. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission of the study participants. The data were transcribed, coded and analysed for themes, commonalities and distinctions. Member checking was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the understandings gathered from the qualitative data; participants were contacted again and were asked for feedback on the outcomes of the qualitative data analysis. The process helped to confirm or disconfirm the consistency of the interpretations derived from the qualitative data. In reporting the data, participant confidentiality was maintained using pseudonyms in place of participant names. Also, qualitative research experts were asked to review the preliminary insight ascertained from the data to ensure the authenticity of the data analysis.

Findings and discussion

Assessments used in early childhood education

Early childhood teachers indicated that they use standardised and alternative assessments to gather assessment data from children (see Table 1).

All the participants mentioned that they use standardised assessments to determine eligibility for special education services. However, they shared a concern about the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI) when it comes to the assessment of immigrant children or children who are ELLs. The norming group used in the development of the BDI does not include children with disabilities; neither does the norming group include children who are ELLs. One of the participants stated:

‘... I like the BDI because it is user-friendly... but the problem is that it is not culturally and

Table 1: Type of assessments used in early childhood classrooms

Standardised assessments	Alternative/authentic assessments
Battelle Developmental Inventory	Work sampling
Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills	Systematic observations
	Examination of student products
	Portfolios
	Interviewing adults (e.g., parents and care givers)
	Elicit response from children

linguistically responsive to immigrant children . . . it does not take into account those with disabilities . . .

Another said:

' . . . As for immigrant children . . . I think we need to use other forms of assessments to complement the BDI . . . sometimes ELLs have low scores because the questions are not culturally responsive . . . it is not best practice to use an assessment with groups not included in the norms. We can't do anything for now that is what is used in our school.'

Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is a standardised assessment that can be described as 'a set of standardised, individually administered measures of early literacy development. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of pre-reading and early reading skills' (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2006, ¶ 1). Participants criticised this assessment for they believe that it is used to label and track students, and in most instances, immigrant children would be the majority of those identified by DIBELS to be 'at risk'. One participant said,

'DIBELS is no better . . . they say it is the most comprehensive test currently available but to me it does not help much. It does not give a detailed account of the needs that children have . . . it just labels them as at risk and nothing else . . . For the ELLs it does not help much, most of them cannot do well because it is timed. They take their time to think and to say it in English . . . DIBELS does not allow for that time because the clock will go off.'

Participants indicated that for assessment to guide their day to day activities with young children, they use alternative assessments such as work sampling, systematic observations and examination of student products, portfolios, interviews with adults, and eliciting responses from children. All teachers mentioned that systematic observations work best with immigrant children. They are able to document what immigrant children are able to do in natural environments. One teacher said:

' . . . Observations are the way to go . . . when you observe with a purpose you are able to see what [ELLs] can do even though they do not speak English well. You observe their strength and weakness . . . for documentation purposes I use anecdotal records and checklists . . . they work well.'

Another said:

'I observe a lot especially when they are not able to communicate well . . . you know with these standardized one-on-one assessments you do not get much of their [ELLs] strengths. All you get are weaknesses. With observations you are able to gain

information that helps you with where they are at and also with a starting point to build on.'

Language barriers

One of the major challenges is the language barrier (see Table 2). All teachers reported that language barriers interfere in the gathering of effective assessment data from immigrant children. Most immigrant children speak a different language at home, and it is difficult for education professionals to assess immigrant children to determine their zones of proximal development (ZPD), and also to find out those with special needs. Vygotsky (1978) coined the concept of ZPD that can be interpreted to mean the difference between what children can do on their own and what they can do with adult assistance (Deiner, 2005; Reutzler and Cooter, 2007). Teachers can only plan for scaffolding within the ZPD after assessment. Due to language barriers, it is difficult to determine the ZPDs of immigrant children. In addition, developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) indicate that assessment should be done as children enter the programme to build curriculum on what children already know (Aldridge and Goldman, 2007; Kostelnik et al., 2011). If teachers do not know the immigrant children's language, it is difficult to meet DAP that require teachers to plan a sound curriculum based on assessment information of what children are able to do (Howard, 1999). Teachers in this study indicated that they make an effort to gather effective assessment information by using alternative assessments such as authentic performance assessments as a way to find out where children with language problems (immigrant children) stand. One teacher said: 'I observe a lot especially when they are not able to communicate well . . . you know with these standardized one-on-one assessments you do not get much of their [ELLs] strengths.'

Because of language barriers, many of the immigrant children have ended up in special education programmes that are supposed to support those with learning disabilities (Amjad, 2009; Deiner, 2010; Rinaldi and Samson, 2008). This was also a concern shared by some teachers. One teacher stated: ' . . . from standardized assessments . . . I noticed that most immigrant children are identified with some delay either language delays or social problems . . . in reality they might not have those problems.'

Table 2: Top-rated teacher challenges in gathering assessment information from immigrant children

Challenge	Per cent of teachers
Language barriers	100
Culturally and linguistically unresponsive assessment measures	100
Lack of parent's full participation in the assessment process	80
Lack of knowledge of early childhood development	70
Cultural clashes	60

When immigrant children enter the language intervention programmes or special education programmes, many children suffer the stigma of being labelled the ‘incompetent child’. It goes without saying that children do not like to be labelled ELLs, ESL students, or limited English language learners (NCTE, 2008). Most immigrant parents find it offensive to have their children labelled or placed in ELLs programmes or immigrant programmes. One teacher stated: ‘some parents do not participate in the assessment programs [and intervention programs] because they do not like the name [ELL] . . . maybe they [parents] are ashamed of the name [label].’ It is important to note that some teachers use the label ELL as a derogatory term and ‘have negative perceptions, biases and racist attitudes about the students they teach, and about the students’ families, cultures . . .’ (Nieto, 2005, pp. 217–18).

When immigrant children are pulled out for intervention programmes to support language development or to make up for the developmental delays (which they usually do not have, but, due to assessments which are culturally and linguistically unresponsive, they end up labelled as having delays), not only do they suffer the stigma but they also fall behind in their regular classroom curriculum (Deiner, 2010; Garcia, Kleifgen and Falchi, 2008).

Cultural and linguistically unresponsive assessment measures

Another major challenge that teachers face apart from the language barriers is that of culturally and linguistically unresponsive assessment measures. Culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally relevant teaching, (Gay and Kirkland, 2003; Nieto, 2005; Smith and Kander, 2005) entail that all assessment measures should be culturally responsive. Contrary, today, most assessments or testing measures, which are culturally unresponsive, pose problems that lead to early childhood professionals failing to gather effective assessment information from immigrant children. One teacher said: ‘most norm-referenced assessments we use in early childhood education are not normed for ELLs [immigrant children] . . . so immigrants are over referred . . . for instance the BDI . . . the Developmental Profile II, the DIAL-R . . . you name it . . . the normative group does not include immigrants . . .’

Assessment measures (standardised tests) such as the norm-referenced test fail to yield accurate information as to whether immigrant children have developmental delays or not. Norm-referenced tests compare an individual child’s performance with a representative sample of children. Such tests are developed by administering the measure to a sample of children who are representative of the population to be tested. It is a concern that norm-referenced tests are mostly used for screening children as they enter early childhood programmes because most norm-referenced tests do not include a sample from countries other than the United States. Mclean et al. (2004) note that:

‘. . . the sample should be inspected . . . Ideally, the sample should be stratified, with proportionate

representation of various cultures, geographic regions, gender, income levels, and urban-rural distribution. If a normative group fails to consider one or more of these variables, its representativeness must be questioned.’ (p. 27)

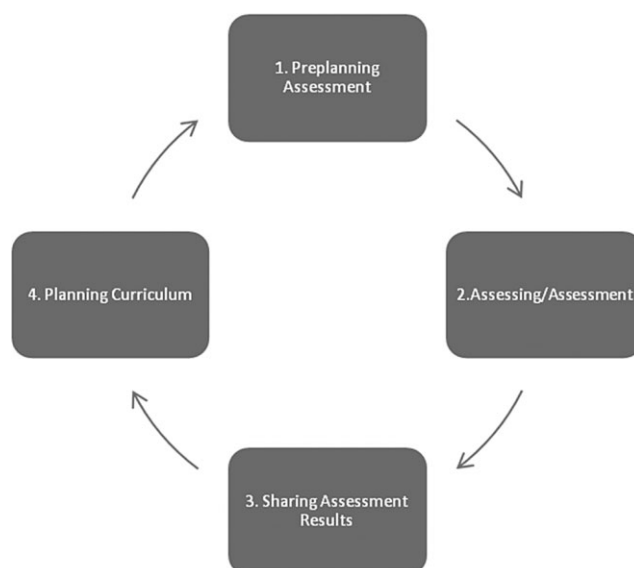
Renowned authors Mclean et al. (2004) have highlighted the unfairness of administering a norm-referenced test developed in the United States to immigrant students using a sample from two states such as the Developmental Profile II (Alpern, Boll and Shearer, 1980) who collected normative data primarily in Indiana and Washington. If they raised concerns about the applicability of such a test across the United States, how much can be said about its applicability to immigrant children who have just landed in the United States? This confirms that many immigrant children are diagnosed with developmental delays, and some, if not all, are given a curriculum that does not support their development because the assessments are not congruent with their cultures and therefore fail to yield correct information that guide the curriculum.

Lack of parents’ full participation in the assessment process

The third challenge as illustrated is lack of immigrant parents’ full participation in the assessment process. Effective assessment as indicated in Bagnato and Neisworth’s (1991) definition involves parents’ full participation in the assessment process. The assessment process in which parents need to be active participants has four phases as illustrated in Figure 1. Figure 1 also illustrates a strong connection between assessment and curriculum; Deiner (2010) also note that ‘assessment and curriculum are inextricably tied together’ (p. 70).

Parents collaborate by sharing information with early childhood teachers and other professionals during assessment

Figure 1: Assessment process



to provide a better picture of what the child is able and not able to do. Sixty per cent of the teachers indicated that full participation of immigrant parents in the assessment process is a challenge. One teacher stated: ‘. . . One of my ELLs parents [immigrant parent] attended one parent conference out of three conferences . . . both the mother and father always say they have to work . . . their hours will be cut if they miss work. . . .’

Most immigrant parents are poor (Russell Sage Foundation, 2011; The Urban Institute, 2006), and they speak ESL. Research indicates that low-income parents find it difficult to attend assessment meetings frequently because they are more worried about their jobs than attending parent–teacher conferences or assessment meetings (McLean et al., 2004; Semple, 2011). McLean et al. (2004) note that ‘it is unrealistic to expect families who are grappling with the effects of poverty and struggling to survive to wholeheartedly and willingly embrace and participate in assessment and educational services for their young children’ (p. 74). In addition, most immigrant parents who speak ESL find it difficult to contribute to the assessment process even though they might attend all the assessment meetings due to language barriers (Guo, 2010). Research indicates that the greatest obstacle to parental participation among immigrant parents is the language barrier (Guo, 2010; Turney and Kao, 2009). This is also confirmed by teachers in this study. One teacher said: ‘I really do not gain much from ESL parents . . . they come to the meetings [assessment meeting] they keep nodding to everything . . . they do not talk much. . . .’

Lack of early childhood development knowledge

Apart from limited language proficiency, the fourth challenge that most immigrant parents face is the lack of early childhood development knowledge necessary to communicate effectively during assessment meetings and programme planning (see Table 2). This has been documented as one of the problems with most immigrant parents (Deiner, 2010; Semple, 2011; The Urban Institute, 2006). One participant of the study stated: ‘. . . parents [immigrant parents] agree to most of the suggestions during the meetings [assessment meetings] . . . one reason I noticed is that they do not have any concept of how children develop . . . I think they need some child development education or training before they can start filling out those observation forms . . . I mean like The Ounce Scale. . . .’ The Ounce Scale is an alternative assessment that informs the curriculum as well as tracks a child’s development. This assessment requires parents to document what they observe at home and other natural environments in the form of family albums, and later compare and discuss with what teachers document in child care or classrooms.

Illegal immigrant parents have the lowest education when it comes to child development. Most likely, they do not follow early childhood development principles that support language and cognitive development. This can be inferred from Yoshikawa’s (2011) study which reveals that by the time children of illegal immigrants reached age 2, they show significantly lower levels of language and cognitive devel-

opment than the children of legal immigrants and native-born parents. Research indicates that parents can be trained during parent–teacher workshops about child development so that they will be able to make sound contribution during pre-assessment planning (Deiner, 2005; McLean et al., 2004). Although training workshops provide parents with the necessary information that help them in observing their child at home, it is costly to run the workshops for most school districts. In addition, illegal immigrant parents find it difficult to come out of the shadows and attend training sessions due to their illegal status. This is mainly true in Alabama and Arizona where the immigration law requires police to check the immigration status of anyone they detain and suspect of being in the nation illegally. Several other states require immigrants to carry their papers at all times and ban people without proper documents from soliciting for work in public places and from attending public gatherings (Reuters, 2011). Furthermore, many immigrant parents who come to the United States under the Diversity Visa Lottery and other ‘Golden Opportunity’ programmes are likely most of the time to be first interested in seeking employment to make money instead of ensuring a better education for their child/children. It takes several years for many of such parents to realise that their children’s education is very important, and that their own involvement in education and in assessment of their children is of vital importance.

Cultural clashes

The fifth and last challenge that teachers face in gathering effective assessment information is cultural clashes. One teacher said: ‘I have a parent from Africa, I cannot tell if she agrees with me or not . . . she does not nod her head . . . she doesn’t look at me . . . she does not question anything . . . at first it bothered me and I reached out for help and someone told me that in some cultures parents do not question the teacher. . . .’

Cultural clashes affect immigrant parents’ optimal participation in their children’s assessment meetings. Immigrant parents and their children face challenges in maintaining the connection between school and home, and in negotiating sociocultural backgrounds with new experiences in educational settings (Isik-Ercan, 2010; Zimmerman-Orozco, 2011). In the same vein, McLean et al. (2004) indicated that in working with immigrant families, there are cultural clashes ‘from failing to work through a trained interpreter, to asking questions that the family considered to be intrusive, to basing assessments on skills that are not part of a child’s daily life’ (p. 75). Research indicates that cultural clashes can be minimized through enhancing cross-cultural competence, however, some argue that for early childhood professionals to achieve cross-cultural competence a more serious challenge is encountered due to the fact that there are ‘more than 460 English languages spoken nationwide’ (NAEYC, 2005, p. 1). Even though it is a challenge for teachers to attain cultural competence, practical efforts should be made to achieve that goal. Three training components that are essential in the quest to attain cross-cultural competence include ‘clarifying one’s own values, gaining

cultural specific information, and applying and practicing the methods and information acquired through self – examination and information gathering’ (McClean et al., 2004, p. 77).

A way forward

In order for early childhood teachers to gather effective assessment data from immigrant children, assessment needs to be developmentally and educationally significant, and culturally and linguistically responsive. For assessment to be culturally and linguistically responsive, characteristics of the normative sample should be analysed. The sample needs to be stratified, with proportionate representation of various cultures, geographic regions, gender, income levels and urban–rural distribution (McClean et al., 2004).

Tremendous effort needs to be deployed to sensitise immigrant children’s parents on the key role that parents play in the educational success of their children, and parents also have to be informed and convinced of the important role that assessment plays in the success of their children. Such skills and preoccupations can be imparted to parents through carefully selected training methods that do not intimidate them but rather convince them of the invaluable nature of the assessment of their children’s progress and also of the role that they (as parents) play in that process.

There should be a way of bringing illegal immigrant parents out of the shadows without reprimanding them because they are raising children who are US citizens. Although this is debatable, immigration matters should be separated from education matters to allow illegal immigrant parents to participate fully in the education of their children who are US citizens. In the same vein, Horace Mann’s (1848) theory of opportunity hails education as a great equaliser of opportunity and chance. Mann (1848) wanted education to be universal to counter oppression and domination, he stated,

‘surely nothing but universal education can counterwork this tendency to the domination of capital and servility of labor. If one class possesses all the wealth and the education, while the residue of society is ignorant and poor, it matters not by what name the relationship between them may be called: the latter, in fact and in truth, will be the servile dependents and subjects of the former. But, if education be equally diffused, it will draw property after it by the strongest of all attractions; for such a thing never did happen, as that an intelligent and practical body of men should be permanently poor’ (p. 4).

Following Mann’s suggestion on universal education would mean ‘leaving no children behind’, giving an opportunity to immigrant children that ensures their parents’ participation in their education (learning and assessment process) without constraints.

There is also a need to motivate immigrant parents who speak ESL to fully participate in the assessment process and the education of their children as a whole. Motivation can

be increased through offering of English language classes that minimise language barriers.

School districts should also offer parent workshops geared toward educating immigrant parents about child development and the assessment process, and also training on how to use certain assessment instruments that require information from parents. Screening tests such as the ages and stages and ongoing assessments such as the Ounce Scale require parents to participate in the assessment process. However, if they do not have knowledge of child development, that would be difficult to complete the portion meant for parents.

The issue of heritage language is becoming more and more important in the United States (Lee and Shin, 2008). A heritage language is a language that is acquired by individuals raised in homes where the dominant language of the region, such as English in the United States, is not spoken or not exclusively spoken (Valdés, 2000). A heritage language is typically acquired before a dominant language but is not completely acquired because of the individual’s switch to that dominant language. This incompletely acquired version of a home language, then, is what is known as a heritage language (Polinsky and Kagan, 2007); the fact that the language is not completely acquired means it can be lost; therefore, advocates for the heritage language want to preserve it. Learning the heritage language and preserving it gives children self-esteem and pride of their culture (Lee and Shin, 2008). Several children are born to immigrant parents and are encouraged to learn the native language of their parents, especially Hispanic and Asian children. Therefore, parents who adhere to the issue of heritage language and heritage cultural practices are encouraged to keep teaching their children. Assessments therefore should be culturally and linguistically responsive to be responsive to the issue of heritage language.

Isik-Ercan’s (2010) study indicates that Turkish parents revisited their early experiences with schooling in Turkey to make sense of their children’s Pre-K-3 experiences. The Turkish parents needed to be convinced that the two systems can work together. There is a need for workshops to help immigrant parents and their children to embrace the US education system with all its intricacies and advantages like assessment, and at the same time, such children and parents can remain faithful to their heritage language and culture. Equally, there is a need to educate the teachers who are from the dominant cultures to teach other people’s children.

Alternative forms of assessments rather than standardised assessments should be the corner stone of assessing immigrant children. Standardised assessments (norm-referenced tests) do not allow modification, and therefore, immigrant children’s performances are measured against a normative group that does not represent them. Alternative forms of assessment such as systematic observations, interviews, portfolios (McAfee et al., 2004), the Work Sampling System (Dichtelmiller, Jablon and Dorfman et al., 2001),

and the Ounce Scale (Meisels, Dombro and Marsden et al., 2003) provide more useful authentic assessment information that guide early childhood teachers in the development of developmentally and culturally responsive curriculum for immigrant children.

Conclusion

Early childhood professional development programmes and teacher education programmes should address the concept of equity and social justice. Teachers need to understand that social justice is not a timeless or static concept but instead reflects the changing social and economic conditions in society (Rizvi, 1998). This understanding will ensure accommodation in the assessment process of immigrant children, and encouragement of full participation of immigrant parents in the assessment and learning process of their children.

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