Background

Today, one in five children in the United States is a child of immigrants; and by 2040, it is projected that one in three will be the child of an immigrant (Rong & Preissle, 1998). Many of these youth bring with them remarkable strengths, however, their journey presents a number of challenges. Many are settling in highly segregated neighborhoods of deep poverty. Immigrant parents often find themselves working long hours, making it difficult for them to monitor their children’s progress and activities and understand their children’s experiences (C. Suárez-Orozco & M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Consequently, immigrant youth are vulnerable to emotional difficulties, as well as the lure of the street. Mentors can provide immigrant youth with structure and supervision, serving as important bridges to their new cultures. In this Research Corner, I explore the challenges facing today’s young immigrants and the ways in which mentors can help.

Who are today’s immigrants?

Immigrants come to the U.S. from a variety of circumstances and contexts. Some come for economic reasons while others are fleeing political, religious or ethnic persecution.

Nearly 80 percent come from Latin America, Asia and the Afro-Caribbean basin (Rumbaut, 1997).

- Latino immigrants from Central and South America, make up the largest group, while those from Asia, especially the countries of Southeast Asia, constitute the second-largest group.

- Caribbean immigrants make up the third-largest group of the foreign-born population coming to the U.S. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997).

What Challenges Are Facing Immigrant Youth?

Naturally, youth from different regions of origin face different types of challenges, and there is often as much variation within each group as between them. Nonetheless, many immigrant groups share the stress associated with migration to a new country. They also share often-intense discrimination and related challenges to achieving high levels of education and
employment as they and their families become settled in the United States. These stressors include:

**Stress related to exclusion**

A growing number of anti-immigrant initiatives, designed to prevent immigrants from receiving benefits or public services, have been initiated in recent years. These practices generate a pattern of intense exclusion and segregation in the work force, schools and housing (Bangston & Zhou, 1997; M. Suárez-Orozco, 1998). The result is a dramatic growth in the numbers of recent immigrant families struggling in segregated communities with inadequate services, substandard schools, insufficient bilingual education services, limited access to gainful employment, intolerance and alienation.

**Stress related to poverty**

Although the very poorest individuals rarely immigrate, many immigrants come from situations of relative poverty. New immigrants to the US typically first settle in highly segregated areas of deep poverty (Orfield & Yun, 1999), either within urban contexts or in rural farming communities. Their neighborhoods are often plagued with violence, gang activity and drug trade, and their schools are often segregated, overcrowded and poorly funded (Luther, 1999). Children raised in circumstances of socio-economic deprivation are vulnerable to a range of difficulties, including anxiety, depression and delinquency (Luthar, 1999).

**Stress related to separation**

Migrations often result in family members being separated from one another for extended periods. Children may be sent to live with relatives in the United States, or parents may emigrate ahead of their children in order to establish a home before the arrival of the entire family. These separations can be unsettling and disturbing, both as youth grow up without their parents, and as they become attached to extended family members from whom they must later separate to move back with their parents (C. Suárez-Orozco & M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

- In a study of 400 immigrant youth from five regions, it was found that fully 80% had been separated from their parents for between several months and several years (C. Suárez-Orozco & M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

**Strain in parent-child relations**

Immigrant parents, as well as other adult family members, often work at more than one job or may be assigned less desirable afternoon and evening shifts. At the same time, their children may turn increasingly away from adults in their family to their peers. The children’s more rapid acculturation can lead to a disconnection between the generations (Sluzki, 1979; C. Suárez-Orozco & M. Suárez-Orozco, in press).

- **Differing language acquisition** -- Children may learn English more quickly than their parents, and even surpass their parents’ educational level, diminishing communication and interrupting the balance of power and authority within the family (Silke & Tip, 1994; C. Suárez-Orozco & M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).
• **Differing cultural knowledge** -- Children’s increasing familiarity with American cultural norms and adolescents’ interest in American music, movies, etc., may alienate parents from their experiences, just as parents’ connection to the language and culture of the country of origin may embarrass adolescents.

• **Differing values** -- Immigrant parents tend to bring with them strong cultural values of respect for elders and of familial interdependence. These cultural models are deeply challenged by the American cultural value of independence, by the interruptions of power and authority that occur when youth serve as language and cultural interpreters for their parents, as well as by the separations inherent in immigration. (C. Suárez-Orozco & M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

### Contributions of Mentors

The disconnection between immigrant youth and their parents, as well as the stressors associated with poverty and discrimination can be overwhelming to immigrant youth and their families. Mentors can sometimes help guide adolescents through difficult transitions.

**Mentors can:**

• **Complement** -- Mentors can alleviate some of the stress in the relationship, while reinforcing parental values about education and behavior. If the mentor is of the same ethnic background as the youth, he or she can interpret the rules of engagement of the new culture to parents and hence, help to soften cultural rigidities.

• **Compensate** -- Since immigrant adolescents’ parents and other adult relatives may be unavailable due to long work hours or emotional distress, the guidance and affection of a mentor may help to fill the void created by parental absence.

• **Bridge** -- As an adult who has been in the United States longer than the mentee, the mentor can also provide information about and exposure to American cultural and educational institutions. The mentor can also help the mentee negotiate transitions.

• **Foster identity development** -- Mentors, particularly those who share similar backgrounds with their mentees, can serve as role models in the challenging process of developing a bicultural identity. They can exemplify the ways in which the youth can preserve and celebrate elements of the ethnic identity while still incorporating features of the more mainstream culture of the United States.

### A word of caution

Although many benefits are associated with mentoring for the development of immigrant youth, mentoring may not be ideally suited to the needs of some immigrant adolescents.

• **Discomfort** -- Some immigrant parents may be uncomfortable having their child in an intense one-on-one relationship with another adult. The parents may feel threatened by the prospect of a non-relative adult usurping parental authority, or may be mistrustful of the intentions of an adult from outside the family.
• **Racial/ethnic differences** -- Although same-race mentoring matches have not been clearly shown to be superior to cross-race matches (Rhodes et al., 2003), cultural differences can have particular implications for immigrant youth. Youth may face language barriers if matched with a mentor who only speaks English. In addition, if a mentor identifies too closely with the mainstream culture, the young person may not receive the support they need to successfully form a bicultural identity.

• **Heightened vulnerability** -- Unexpected termination of a mentoring relationship may be particularly destructive for an immigrant adolescent, especially if they have already experienced the loss of family members and cherished adults during the difficult process of migration (C. Suárez-Orozco & M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001).

### Targeted Programs

In recognition of these potential difficulties -- and the unique experiences of immigrant youth -- several programs have emerged in recent years that have specifically targeted this vulnerable group. A few examples include:

MentoringUSA partnered with New York City public schools and other after-school agencies to offer an English as a Second Language (ESL) mentoring program. This program provides English Language Learners (ELLs) with the academic and emotional support of a caring adult mentor. Mentors have two primary roles: 1) help their mentees improve English skills by supplementing the city’s English as a Second Language curriculum with one-to-one reading and writing lessons; and 2) prepare their mentees for the rigors of middle school and high school. These one-to-one relationships are designed to boost the mentees self-esteem and enable them to better engage in the learning process.

• **Movement City** [http://www.changemakers.com/en-us/node/4239](http://www.changemakers.com/en-us/node/4239)
Mentees in this program participate in Movement City, a series of creative, performing arts, technology and design-focused after-school programs that serve primarily Latino and immigrant (mostly from the Dominican Republic) youth in Lawrence. The mentees interact with their mentors and with fellow mentees on four levels: one-on-one monthly activities with mentors; quarterly group activities with all program participants; community service activities with mentee group; and personal development activities.

• **Puente** [http://www.mccd.edu/puente/mentors.htm](http://www.mccd.edu/puente/mentors.htm)
This California-based program has been acting as a bridge for Latino youth in making the transition from middle school to high school and then from high school to college. Mentors provide explicit and intensive instruction in the steps necessary to enter the college system as well as how to be successful once they have entered the system. Students are also provided with instruction in writing and literature and are assigned a peer partner who acts as guide in the initial transition (Gandara 1998).

Successful mentoring relationships can also be found in the bonds that form between youth and staff members at after-school and community programs. Community youth workers encounter immigrant youth through their involvement in a variety of programs. Some of these programs
have long histories and are chapters of national agencies, while others are small and local. For example:

- **Bajucol** ([http://babel.massart.edu/~sonerito/](http://babel.massart.edu/~sonerito/))
  This community organization provides Colombian youth living in the Boston area with an opportunity to embrace their roots, culture and folklore. Under the guidance of Colombian adults, a group of 25 youth meet twice weekly to practice Colombian folkloric dance. Their efforts culminate in an annual performance to an audience of 1,000. The practice sessions, along with the elaborate preparations for the annual performance provide a focus in the youth’s lives. The young people develop a sense of connectedness with both adults and peers while focusing on an activity that fosters their ethnic pride. In addition, they benefit from having mentors who advocate for them at school and help guide them on the path to success.

**The bottom line**

Immigrant youth growing up in the United States face many challenges. In addition to confronting the normal challenges of childhood and adolescence, they must often deal with the effects of poverty and discrimination and frequent parental absence. Further, are unable to turn to their parents for help in dealing with the complexities of growing up America.

The support of a mentor can prove invaluable to many immigrant youth and their families who are coping with such issues. By forming a caring, supportive relationship with youth, mentors can provide adult guidance and supervision when parents are unable to do so. In addition, mentors can serve as lenses through which immigrant youth can see the possibility of becoming a healthy, trans-cultural adult.

Of course, mentors and other youth workers cannot entirely solve the complex constellation of challenges that immigrant families encounter. However, mentors can contribute to the healthy development of mentees and, in turn, their mentees’ families, by providing much-needed support.

The bottom line is that we need a more complete understanding of the issues currently facing immigrant youth, as well as the much strength that they and their families possess. With this greater understanding, we can generate more positive environments for immigrant youth and use volunteer mentors and community youth workers more effectively.

**Recommendations**

In the meantime, both general and specialized mentoring programs can take these important steps:

- **Training** -- Provide specialized training for volunteer mentors and staff that heighten their cultural sensitivity and helps them understand the unique stressors that specific immigrant groups face.
• **Matching** -- Consider pairing immigrant adolescents with mentors of the same ethnic background. That way, can offer important guidance and role modeling as their mentees explore identity issues within multiple cultural contexts.

• **Recruitment** -- When possible, recruit adult mentors who are immigrants, themselves, or the descendants of immigrants. And, as with any prospective mentor, ensure thorough screening.

• **Training** -- During training, reinforce the idea that premature termination of a mentoring relationship could have especially negative repercussions for many immigrant youth because many are already dealing with significant loss and separation issues.

• **Context** -- Put special emphasis on gaining parental trust. Reach out to the entire family, not just to the mentee.