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# Neighbors Link's *Parent-Child Together* Program: Supporting Immigrant Parents' Integration to Promote School Readiness Among Their Emergent Bilingual Children


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## Cover Page Footnote

**Carola Otero Bracco, MBA**, a first-generation American born of immigrant parents from Bolivia, is the Executive Director of Neighbors Link. She received her MBA from Duke University and worked in corporate finance before leading Neighbors Link, a community based organization with a mission to strengthen the whole community through the healthy integration of immigrants. During Carola's tenure, Neighbors Link has become a leader in designing, implementing and directing community-based, bilingual educational and cultural awareness training programs. In 2016 the organization was awarded the prestigious Non-Profit Management Excellence Award by the New York Community Trust.

**Judie Eisenberg, BA**, is a proposal writer, program planner, and evaluator who helps not-for-profits and government entities to maximize their impact, sustain their organizations and position themselves to win competitive grant dollars. Her company, ProposalPro, Inc., has helped organizations to secure more than \$500 million in funding over the past 22 years. A grant professional certified (GPC) by the Grant Professional Certification Institute (GPCI), she received her B.A. from the State University of New York at Albany and is pursuing a graduate degree at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY.

# Neighbors Link's *Parent-Child Together* Program: Supporting Immigrant Parents' Integration to Promote School Readiness Among Their Emergent Bilingual Children

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The authors of this article describe Neighbors Link, a multi-service community and worker center in suburban Westchester County, NY. This organization created *Parent-Child Together* in the belief that supporting immigrant parents' integration and social inclusion, in activities that also engage long-term community residents, would improve school readiness outcomes for preschool children. A key assumption in the program design is that immigrant parents are best supported when teaching respects their home language and incorporates their home culture and customs. Among the program's positive results has been greater acceptance of the assets and strengths that immigrants bring to the community. The community, concurrently, has incorporated this perspective into programming, notably the school district's new elementary-level dual language program that supports both children of immigrants and long-term residents in becoming bilingual.

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**Keywords:** bicultural, bilingual, emergent bilingual, foreign-born, immigrant, integration, language acquisition, literacy, kindergarten readiness, Neighbors Link, New American, parent, parenting preschool, school, school readiness, suburbia, toddler.

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Lost amidst the increasingly loud rhetoric around who is American and who gets to live, work, and be educated in this country is this startling demographic fact: Today, nearly 25.5% of all children in the US have at least one parent who is foreign-born (Migration Policy Institute, 2014). There are now 61 million immigrants and their young children living in the US, three quarters of whom are here legally (Camarota & Zeigler, 2016). These large and fast-growing populations raise questions of whether the US has the capacity to absorb so many newcomers (Camarota & Zeigler, 2016). Whether born in this country or

born aboard, these children have the right to attend U. S. public schools - and are, in fact, attending and changing the face of public schools across the country.

The authors, in their work with immigrants in a Westchester County, NY multi-service community and worker center, have found that immigrant parents play a significant role in their children's integration into and success in school. This organization, Neighbors Link, created *Parent-Child Together* in the belief that supporting immigrant parents' integration and social inclusion, in activities that also engage residents of the receiving communities, would improve school readiness outcomes for their preschool children. The organization's experience to date suggests that this is the case. Additionally, as it will be described here, it appears that this approach cultivates an appreciation of immigrant culture, perspective, and language that strengthens the entire community, and holds promise for broader study and replication.

This article examines trends in immigration, the debate on *assimilation* versus *integration* of immigrants, and Neighbors Link's history in defining and fostering integration. The authors also explain the rationale for the creation of *Parent-Child Together*, how this developed from the Neighbors Link mission of integration and community relationships, and the influence of this program on parents, children, and the community.

### **The Changing Face of Education**

Immigrant children and the children of immigrants have been the fastest growing segments of the under-18 population nationwide (Migration Policy Institute, 2014). By 2050, more than one-third (34%) of the nation's children will be immigrants or will have immigrant parents (Park & McHugh, 2014; Passel & Cohen, 2008). At the same time, the number of people who speak a language other than English at home has reached an all-time high at 61.8 million or 21% of the U.S. population (Camarota & Zeigler, 2014). This compelling demographic trend prompted educators to examine their teaching strategies, family engagement practices, and communication channels with an interest toward increasing bilingualism and multiculturalism in their schools. A new awareness of the limitations of monolingualism in schools was highlighted by Utah's educator Gregg Roberts, stating to a panel discussion in Boston in April 2013, "Monolingualism is the illiteracy of the 21st century!" (Roberts, 2013). More recently, the then-U.S. Secretary of Education John King said in a March 2016 speech to California educators, "What we see now is that bilingualism is a gift that we can give to our students and to our communities. And that is a powerful shift in our historical perspective on bilingualism." (King, 2016, para. 5).

In 2017, statements such as those are being challenged. While federal policy is still being formed, these trends - and ensuing debates - are increasingly playing out in suburban communities. Unlike previous waves of immigrants who settled in large urban centers, today's immigrants are moving to suburban areas (Singer, Hardwick, & Brettel, 2009; Suro, Wilson, & Singer, 2011; Wilson & Svailenka, 2014). The suburbs often lack the infrastructure that cities provide and once used to promote the integration of immigrants, such as affordable housing, public transportation, low-cost legal assistance, translation assistance, and language classes. As a result of these changes in settlement patterns, tensions between new arrivals and residents who have been living in the suburban community increasingly define the immigrant experience and serve to negatively impact

their ability to integrate into the community (Licher & Johnson, 2006; Parra & Pfeffer, 2006). In fact, the definitions of assimilation, integration, and American are still very much being debated.

### **Getting from “Us” and “Them” to “We”**

These conflicts often are acted out within a narrative of "us" versus "them" and within the context of classic assimilation, which Papademetriou (2003) defined as the process by which immigrant groups come to resemble the characteristics, values, language, and customs of the receiving society. In this view, the adaptation is all one-way, with the immigrants required to adapt to the receiving culture, and not the other way around. Further, assimilation often is assessed by the receiving culture in terms of its benefits, that is, successful assimilation may be determined by how quickly new Americans learn English, but not by whether or when they earn as much money as residents of the receiving community (Bean, Brown, & Rumbaut, 2006).

In contrast, Neighbors Link promotes the vision of *integration*, defined as "the process through which, over time, newcomers and hosts form an integral whole" (Papademetriou, 2003, para. 12). This definition assumes a two-way process in which dynamic exchanges between immigrants and residents in the receiving culture influence and shape both of their exchanges, perceptions, and interactions in shared spaces and create a sense of "we." This perspective allows for social inclusion, in which all individuals are free to participate in a community's civic, social, economic, and cultural life. While this perspective has support in research, it is far from dominant in the fields of sociology or education (Papademetriou, 2003) or for that matter, life. Yet, this mission has informed all of Neighbors Link's activities.

### **Neighbors Link's Mission and History of Integration**

Neighbors Link's mission is to strengthen the whole community through the healthy integration of immigrants. The center began its work in the village/ town of Mount Kisco.<sup>i</sup> Mount Kisco's approximately 11,000 residents are predominately white (69.5% or 7,661) and affluent (median income of \$71,727 vs. \$58,687 statewide). A quaint, leafy suburban locale, Mount Kisco also offers a modern and vibrant mix of restaurants, shops, entertainment, and offices around a commuter train station hub. As such, Mount Kisco serves as a nexus for business, social networking, and entertainment in northern Westchester County.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mount Kisco began to attract increasing numbers of Guatemalan immigrants. More than 3,000 miles away, Guatemala was emerging from more than three decades of brutal, bloody civil war. Estimates are that during this time, one million Guatemalans were displaced or disappeared, and another million sought refuge in the US and in nearby countries (Green, 2009). During that decade, Guatemalan immigration spiked 643% (Menjivar, 2006). Suzanne Jonas (2013) wrote that approximately 1% (9,700) of the 902,293 Guatemalan immigrants who settled in the US found their way to Westchester County. Many followed family and friends to Mount Kisco. In the decade between 1980 and 1990, Mount Kisco's Latino population nearly tripled, from 4.97% (401) of the town's total population to 12.15% (1,180). As these immigrants moved into housing that quickly grew overcrowded, and clustered in the streets around the

train station to seek day labor in ever-larger numbers, longer-term residents grew uneasy, and then fearful.

By the mid-1990s, longer-term residents and Latino immigrants were on a collision course. Mount Kisco's mayor formed the Community Relations Committee charged with improving relations between the two groups. Committee members used this forum to press for the 1995 passage of Local Law 6, which banned individuals from congregating on streets and at the train station seeking day labor. Later in that same year, the committee pressed for, and the local police responded with, a series of housing raids. Most were conducted in the middle of the night, and all focused on the homes of Latino immigrants. In the largest of these housing raids, 52 Latino men were arrested (Walton, 2002). The raids drew the notice of civil rights advocates who filed a series of lawsuits alleging that Mount Kisco engaged in selective enforcement of local laws to drive out Hispanic immigrants. Public records indicate that most of these cases were settled by Consent Decree, with no admission of wrongdoing. Nonetheless, the village/town agreed to stop enforcing Local Law 6, and the community fell into an uneasy truce.

Founded in 1999 to integrate these two communities, Neighbors Link helps to empower immigrants through employment, education, and supportive services (see Table 1). Programs also feature meaningful roles for longer-term residents. This is a term Neighbors Link created to highlight its work with residents who are born in this country or who are from a prior wave of immigrants and typically are US citizens. For example, high school students who are studying the Spanish language provide supplemental conversa-

<b>Table 1</b>		
<i>Neighbors Link Services</i>		
<b>Neighbors Link is a multi-service community and worker center offering:</b>		
Worker Center	ESOL Education	<i>Parent-Child Together</i>
Workforce Education	Immigration Legal Service	After School Program
Entrepreneurial Training	Parent Education	Summer School Program
	Case Management	

tional practice with adult learners enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

classes. In addition to practice in the use of both languages, students and adults have the opportunity to discuss their cultures, home life, and families and begin to see how, as residents of the same community, their lives appear to be much different and yet much the same. Similarly, Neighbors Link has facilitated on-going conversations between New Americans and local police. Originally intended to improve understanding of each other's perspectives, this relationship has led to fewer violations issued to New Americans for "disturbing the peace," and an increase in immigrant victims and witness cooperating with law enforcement. Even as Mount Kisco's immigrant population continues to increase - and today, 38.3 percent of residents are foreign-born (U.S. Census, 2015) - Neighbors Link builds bridges and fosters relationships among immigrants, longer-term residents, and local institutions that serve to strengthen the whole community.

Increasingly, Neighbors Link is expanding to help other communities across Westchester County, which has much at stake in integrating its immigrant population. The Migration Policy Institute (2016) reports that nearly 6% of all the immigrants in New York



State live in Westchester County. Per the U.S. Census American Community Survey (2010-2015), Westchester County ranks 5th in diversity among the state's 50 most populous counties, with 25.3% of Westchester's 967,315 residents identifying as foreign-born. Overwhelmingly, Westchester County's immigrants are Hispanic or Latino: According to Census data, 69.4% of all Westchester County immigrants are from (in descending order) Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Columbia, or Peru. Language skills are a barrier to integration for many immigrants. More than three-quarters (76.3%) of Westchester's foreign-born residents report speaking a language other than English at home, and 40.4% report that they speak English "less than very well."

Across all of its programs, Neighbors Link serves more than 3,400 individuals, nearly all of whom live in poverty, as determined through staff interviews at intake using federal income guidelines for free and reduced price lunch (Federal Register, 2015). Most of those served are from Guatemala but increasingly participants hail from Honduras, Ecuador, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic. Neighbors Link's staff and Board of Directors are reflective of the ethnicity of the population served: 58% of staff and 20% of its board members are Hispanic or Latino. Nearly all of Neighbors Link's 17 full-time staff and 20 part-time staff are bilingual in English and Spanish, as are 40% of its board members. Additionally, every year, more than 400 longer-term community residents volunteer their time in Neighbors Link programs. While volunteers' ethnicity is not currently tracked, their gender and age group are; they are 60% female and evenly divided between those aged 18 and younger, and those over 18.

### **The Role of Immigrant Parents in Preparing Children for School**

Within the context of increasing immigration in suburban communities such as Westchester County, little attention has been paid to those who are the first teachers of immigrant children and the children of immigrants, their parents. In their work at Neighbors Link, the authors have observed that immigrant parents are key to their children's integration, starting at a very young age. Supporting immigrant parents in their integration helps to prepare their *emergent bilingual* children for school success. Smith and Kumi-Yeboah (2015) define emergent bilinguals as students whose linguistic repertoire taps into their native language and the (second) language of the receiving culture in varying, developing stages on their way to achieving balanced bilingualism, and is used in contrast with Limited English Proficient (LEP), English Language Learner (ELL) or other deficit-oriented terms.

As mentioned earlier in the article, the *Parent-Child Together* is a program that focuses on immigrant parents' integration and social inclusion. Neighbors Link created *Parent-Child Together* in the belief that supporting immigrant parents' integration and social inclusion, in activities that also engage long-term community residents, would improve school readiness outcomes for preschool children. A key assumption in the program design is that immigrant parents are best supported when teaching respects their home language, and incorporates their home culture and customs.

Locally, members of the community school district shared with Neighbors Link that immigrant children and children of immigrants were entering kindergarten without the basic content, language, and literacy skills, and social and emotional skill levels of their peers. These differences meant that immigrant children and children of immigrants started

school with a skills gap that set them apart from their better-prepared peers, thus reinforcing barriers to educational and social integration. It should be noted that the infants and toddlers served by *Parent-Child Together* are not likely to receive a preschool education; the community school district does not have the resources to provide a traditional preschool program in the elementary school and families cannot pay the tuition for a private preschool. While some subsidized preschool programs do exist, the demand far outweighs the classroom space. As such, kindergarten is often the first school experience for the infants and toddlers in the Neighbors Link program. Local schools work with kindergarteners at their level of academic and social emotional competence, but entering school with skills, support, and resources can better prepare these children to succeed.

Clearly, there was a need in Mount Kisco for a program that helped immigrant parents to prepare their children for school. The question was, how to proceed? Neighbors Link was founded to work holistically with immigrant families. The organization offers programs for the whole family including after school tutoring and Friday night social events, among other programs. In 2011, Neighbors Link made a decision to integrate this programming and serve families in a more strategic way. It introduced the Family Center to provide structure and staff focused on (a) parent support and education; (b) early childhood development and academic support for children; and (c) access to community resources.

To respond to the needs of immigrant parents with preschool children Neighbors Link created *Parent-Child Together* or, in Spanish, *Adelante Juntos* (Moving Forward Together). It is a key program within the Family Center that integrates all three focus-areas of the organization. It provides parents with education in child development and parenting skills. It instructs parents and children in skills needed for school readiness, and the staff offers access to resources both within the group of participating families, i.e. community building, and in the greater community.

The *Parent-Child Together* program serves preschool age children and follows a curriculum and lesson plans that Neighbors Link staff developed in-house based on staff experience working with immigrant families. In designing the program, Neighbors Link drew from its mission of integration with longstanding partners that included local schools, libraries, police departments, employers, and health care providers and from its focus on adult education. From there, it built on its core beliefs: (a) parents are a child's first and most important teachers; (b) immigrant parents are best supported when teaching respects their home language and incorporates their home culture, and (c) adults learn best when they can draw upon their life experiences on the basis of their learning. From this perspective, the authors saw that parents had a unique contribution to make in preparing their children for school.

### **Allowing for Immigrant Parents' Contributions**

Just five short years ago, then-President Obama cited the energy, optimism, entrepreneurial nature, drive, and dynamism of new Americans, saying, "Immigration makes America stronger. Immigration makes us more prosperous. And immigration positions America to lead in the 21st century" (2012, para. 15). But social and educational policies in the United States often do not consider the contributions that immigrants bring



to the receiving culture, and end up hurting immigrants and longer-term residents alike (García, Kliefgen, & Falchi, 2008; Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015).

As an example, the assimilation perspective requires that immigrants stop using their home language and promote their children's use of English to foster fluency in the English Language. This perspective prevents immigrants and longer-term residents from using their bilingualism as a resource in contributing to society in areas, such as, business and education. The research on bilingualism, however, consistently finds that restricting the use of a child's home language in school actually *decreases* the likelihood that a child will become proficient in the English language (Parrish et al., 2006; Uriarte et al., 2009). Conversely, dual language instruction, in which all students in a classroom are taught literacy and content in two languages, has been proven consistently to promote English language acquisition and proficiency (Tazi, 2014; Umansky & Reardon, 2014). Further, several studies have linked bilingualism with cognitive benefits including increased control over attention, improved working memory, greater awareness of the structure and form of language, and better abstract and symbolic representation skills (Adesope, Lavin, Thompson, & Ungerleider, 2010; Bialystok, 2011). Benefits of bilingualism extend beyond language acquisition and have been found to have positive effects on intergroup relationships, identity, self-esteem, and the likelihood of choosing friends from a different culture (Wright & Tropp, 2005).

Similarly, seeing immigrants as "less than" or a threat to those who have been here longer limits society's ability to benefit from the knowledge, experience, and determination that immigrant populations have long brought to this county. On the contrary, immigrant parents have much to contribute to the host society and their children's education. For example, many immigrants have rich, compelling stories about their migration to this country that have the potential to teach life skills of grit, endurance, humor, vision, and optimism, while sharing lessons about relationships, customs, travel, work, and terrain in the home country versus the new. Yet immigrants who are perceived as deficient or who come to see themselves in that way are not empowered as potential partners in their children's academic success. Research consistently shows that children, especially those from birth to age five, experience their world through their relationships with parents and other caregivers. There is ample evidence that parenting behavior is linked to children's well-being, cognitive and socio-emotional development, and academic success (Gelatt, Peters, Kopal, & Monson, 2015). Studies on resiliency increasingly indicate that every child who does well in life has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). Other investigations show that parents' displays of warmth and affection, monitoring of children's activities, and consistent but not harsh discipline, are tied to children's improved academic performance and lessened behavioral problems (Brooks-Gunn & Markham, 2005; Kotchick & Forehand, 2002).

A further danger of assimilation lies in perceiving immigrants as somehow "less than" those who have lived here longer, and thus as having no contribution to make. But this perception belies the facts. The assimilationist perspective challenges fully integrating immigrants into social and economic spheres and it often results in lower levels of income, English proficiency, and educational attainment, and higher levels of poverty and material hardships for immigrant families (Gelatt et al., 2015). These factors are consistently linked

in educational research to lower educational attainment (Gelatt et al., 2015). However, unless these factors (i.e., income, education, English proficiency) are considered within a broader perspective of immigrants' integration into society and economy, these are more likely to be seen as failures of immigrant individuals or their culture. Research indicates that when studies control for these factors, the differences between immigrants and non-immigrants in parenting and academic achievement largely disappear (Gelatt et al., 2015). On the other hand, taking a strengths-based approach and seeing immigrants as *assets*, as 55% of the US population have been reported to do (Piacenza, 2015), opens the possibility for greater acceptance that immigrant parents have the same potential as their longer-term peers to prepare their children for school success.

In designing *Parent-Child Together*, Neighbors Link took a strengths-based approach that builds on participants' talents and resources. As an example, the Guatemalan culture has a strong tradition of using the visual arts as a means of expression. Connecting to this experience, *Parent-Child Together* uses Visual Thinking Strategies, a methodology developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine (2000), to introduce parents to the practice of using inquiry about art as an educational tool. Parents are taught to ask their children open-ended questions about what they are seeing, such as, *What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? And, what more can you find?* This inquiry fosters children's critical thinking and oral language skill-building and is linked to academic growth in students with limited English language skills (Tazi, Vidal, & Stein, 2015).

A strengths-based approach assumes that those served by the program are collaborators, rather than persons to be fixed, and already have resources, agency, leadership, and other assets needed for their success (Rapp, Saleebey, & Sullivan, 2005). An advantage of this strengths-based approach for Neighbors Link is that it promotes community involvement and, eventually, ownership in whatever strategy the process produces (Kettner, Moroney, & Martin, 2013). At the heart of this project's design is the appreciation and use of immigrants' home language and culture as a bridge to greater understanding and connection with longer-term residents and community institutions, including schools.

### **Adelante Juntos (Moving Forward Together)**

*Parent-Child Together* is offered on a drop-in basis year-round. The term "drop-in" belies the fact that each year the program serves about 400 parents and children who stay with the program for four to five years until kindergarten. Two-hour class sessions include parent education, child education, and parent-child interaction. Class sessions are offered at various times throughout the week, and parents may attend one or more. Each session is limited to groups of 12-15 families to allow for deeper learning and more personal interactions.

The project's activities are held at Neighbors Link's center which has a toddler-sized classroom with low tables and chairs, an art area, reading space, manipulatives (i.e., puzzles, toys, blocks), activity bins, a lending library, and a common area. *Parent-Child Together* is led by a trained instructor who leads the parent training and oversees the overall program, as well as trained staff who provide instruction to the children and support the activities parents and children perform together.

To start, parents drop their children in the classroom, where staff leads the children in instructive play. Children learn colors, shapes, letters, and numbers and are encouraged to play together. This time also gives both the parents and children an opportunity to practice separating and spending time apart, an important school-readiness milestone.

Parents then go to another classroom, where the instructor leads a discussion on child development, parenting skills, and instructional strategies (e.g., reading to children, providing positive discipline, recognizing developmental milestones, building vocabulary for emergent bilingual children, etc.). A typical session is rich with activities that the parents can also perform at home.

Parents and children are reunited in the second hour when they join staff and volunteers in a series of activities, including circle time, which features reading, music, and movement that the parents perform together with their children. Parents then work with staff and volunteers to lead their children in the activities that they just learned. Instruction and activities are performed primarily in Spanish, simultaneously allowing parents to focus on the skills just learned and reinforcing acquisition in the home language that will pave the way for English language acquisition in both parents and children. Songs are taught and sung in both languages and books are read in both languages.

The *Parent-Child Together* community-center setting provides Neighbors Link with the visibility to recruit from families who participate in other programs and to share news about the program via word of mouth. Since its inception, the program has been nearly fully subscribed. Being in a community center also provides the flexibility to work in one classroom with parents and all of their children, including at least one child age birth to 5. Being culturally sensitive to this community includes allowing children of all ages, both because families often have no childcare available for siblings and because close-knit immigrant families prefer participating together. From a program design perspective, this setting allows the parent to share this knowledge with all their children and recreates conditions that exist in their home. The community setting also allows for the extended use of longer-term residents as program volunteers. They work alongside immigrant parents in program activities, creating a cultural exchange that fosters a mutual appreciation of varied styles of parenting and family interaction.

Further, the use of longer-term residents as volunteers in the program is critical to developing cross-cultural competency in the greater community and thus, fostering integration. Neighbors Link volunteers come from all walks of life and diverse economic backgrounds. Some are currently employed professionals while others are retired. About half are high school students. While some are bilingual, most are not. All Neighbors Link programming is structured to include volunteers in meaningful assignments, modeling the integration the organization seeks to create in the community center. In more recent years, volunteers include clients, thus providing another channel for immigrant integration. All volunteers receive an orientation and ongoing training.

Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) identified six dimensions of culture: power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, longer-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. Latin American and U.S. cultures are opposed on several of these dimensions, meaning that success in one perspective is seen as a failing in the other. As an example, Neighbors Link

staff experience suggests that Latin American families tend to be collectivist; and, as such, individuals see themselves as part of a group that acts together and put the needs of this group before their own needs. Learning within these families is embedded inside a social context, and it matters very much how well the others in their group are performing. By contrast, cultural values of majority population in the US focus on individual characteristics and solo accomplishment. Individuals compete with others and act independently. In a classroom setting, students from collectivist cultures may demonstrate helpfulness and contribute to the work of another student - behavior that may be viewed as cheating in individualist perspectives. *Parent-Child Together* provides an opportunity for immigrants and longer-term residents to see how their cultural perspective influences behaviors, and how their views of appropriate behaviors depend on the context of their culture.

### **Additional Supports and Access to Resources**

There is a strong family feel to the program, which is led by a Parent Education Manager who knows every family by name and uses every opportunity to check regarding their well-being. While not formally case management, these conversations allow the Parent Education Manager to assess whether the family is experiencing any particular challenges that should be addressed through other Neighbors Link resources or by referral to community resources.

Neighbors Link encourages parents to draw upon their own life experiences as the basis of their learning. This approach validates parent's existing knowledge and abilities resulting in building trust in their own expertise. This validation of their worth allows each individual to follow their own personal path. Most immigrants leave behind people, places, foods, customs, holidays, styles of clothes, and occupations that are not easily replicated, nor appreciated, in their new place. They are forced to adapt and learn new ways, often without formal training. Some immigrants experience violence, deprivation, and trauma in their journey to this country that must be processed. Neighbors Link staff listens empathetically and helps to address parents' issues of trauma and loss. In doing so, staff uses a culturally competent approach that considers the power of participants' home language with familiar words and expressions to help them to share powerful emotions and traumatic experiences as a step toward growth and learning.

In a 12-week intensive course called *Parenting Journeys*, parents may be invited to explore their feelings of trauma and loss and to examine how the way in which they were parented has influenced their style and expectations of parenting. This class is limited to ten sets of immigrant parents who engage in peer-to-peer sharing of stories and perspectives in a supportive environment. *Parenting Journeys* alleviates feelings of isolation and allows parents to articulate their painful stories, disrupt unconscious patterns, and learn new parenting skills that can support their children's success in school and life.

### **Contributions of Parent-Child Together**

In four years of operation, Neighbors Link observed how *Parent-Child Together* has influenced children, families, and the greater community. During that time, program records show that 630 children and parents have participated in the program and, in 2016, the first group of 30 five-year-old program graduates entered kindergarten in local schools.

School district contacts report that there is evidence that program graduates are entering kindergarten with increased content, i.e., knowing their letters, numbers, colors, and shapes because their parents have taught this to them. As one parent said, "My child learned so much from this program that when she started school the teachers were impressed with how much she knew. I was able to teach her at home from coming to the groups." As indicated informally by school district personnel, they have observed an increase in language and literacy skills and social-emotional skills in this first group of graduates, as compared to their observation of earlier classes.

Working in partnership with the school district has eased the transition into kindergarten for children of immigrants, and fostered an increase in parent engagement in their child's education. In recent years the school district reports that 100% of the parents in the local elementary school - both immigrant and longer-term residents - attend parent-teacher meetings. The authors observed, as well, increased parent civic engagement. Parents engaged in Family Center civic engagement and leadership training have led *Parent-Child Together* workshops, have spoken at school board meetings, and have advocated for immigrants at lobbying days in the state's capital. Immigrant parents and longer-term residents also collaborated to launch a healthy eating initiative at Neighbors Link to promote the consumption of more fruits and vegetables community-wide.

Parents report that the program improved their child's skills as well as their own, reduced their feelings of isolation, and put them in a stronger position to be more engaged in community life. As one mother said, "In the groups, I have learned how to educate my child but also for me to be much more social and not so fearful" when dealing with school teachers and authorities. Another mother said, "I have learned that I am not the only one experiencing problems and difficulties because we are all living through this. I no longer feel alone with my fear of dealing with this part of my life."

An additional benefit of this project has been the longer-term residents' dawning awareness that their own characteristics, values, language, and customs are merely one way of living a life - not *the* way. As they gain a clearer sense of their cultural identity, they also begin to appreciate the contributions of others and expand their vision of what is possible. As one longer-term resident observed, "volunteering at Neighbors Link has helped me understand the hard work and determination it takes to migrate and that this translates into a very strong work ethic - I had no idea."

This shift in the perspective of the longer-term residents, from seeing immigrants as a problem to realizing their contributions to a community, has strengthened partnerships and allowed for mutually reinforcing messages across different spheres of community life. For example, four years ago the community school district introduced a dual-language program at the local elementary school. The children of both immigrants and longer-term residents are studying in both English and Spanish throughout the school day, a program made possible by shifting perspectives on the benefits of bilingualism. In this dual-language program, children of immigrants and of longer-term residents are both emergent bilingual and are learning together as well as from each other. Together, they are developing an expanded sense of community. As one longer-term parent said, "My child is learning to socialize with other children which he otherwise wouldn't have. Being in a



group where both Spanish and English are spoken, my son is now singing songs in Spanish. I am so happy he is learning another language."

## Discussion

*Parent-Child Together* was built on Neighbors Link's mission of healthy integration and its focus on adult education to support the school readiness of the emergent bilingual children of immigrant parents. This project reinforced Neighbors Link's core belief that integration, meaning, the belief that immigrants and longer-term residents each bring benefits to the whole community, supports not only individual development but also creates a climate of acceptance for bilingual education, which further empowers immigrant parents and strengthens educational and cultural outcomes for both immigrants and longer-term residents. These outcomes include improved school readiness and literacy and numeracy skills, but also a greater acceptance of diversity and improved social behaviors. Making this a process that engages the entire community moves the conversation away from educating "those kids" to benefitting "our kids" (Goldenberg & Wagner, 2015). It is conceivable that children of different nationalities who learn each other's languages in kindergarten will be friends who share the same lunch table in middle school, and thus strengthen the community and its institutions as they mature and expand their sphere of influence. Beyond being bilingual, these children have the opportunity and advantage of becoming bicultural in an increasingly globalized social, economic, and political world.

A key assumption in the *Parent-Child Together* project design is that immigrant parents are best supported when teaching respects their home language and incorporates their home culture and customs. This ameliorates cultural disorientation by keeping a connection to relevant experiences and familiar signs and symbols from which to learn a new language and new skills and, ultimately, supports language skills in both languages.

Improving parents' social and economic integration builds their resources for supporting their children's academic achievement by enabling them to provide books and experiences that are linked to academic success. Acceptance, or knowing that they are seen as having a contribution, makes this more likely. Conversely, social and educational policies that do not consider the contributions that immigrants bring to the receiving culture only hurt immigrants and longer-term residents alike. Where there are hostilities between the two groups, critical resources are not likely to be provided for dual language programs, parent education, or early learning programs.

Finally, among the most universally understood human experiences is that of being a parent. This understanding transcends culture, nationality, or language, and serves as a powerful, common point upon which to bring people together. Neighbors Link's *Parent-Child Together* program is using this common experience of parenting to foster improved understanding, mutual acceptance, and greater opportunity for both immigrant and longer-term families alike.



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### End Note

<sup>i</sup> Mount Kisco is a coterminous and independent village/town in Westchester County, New York.