



Supporting Families and Developing Parent Advocates and Leaders among the Immigrant Chinese Community in Boston

ELAINE NG

A community organization provides integrated services to immigrant families, grounded in their culture and language, to help parents build on their strengths and support the family's education, health, and social needs.

Nationally, many resources are spent on programs to ameliorate poor educational and economic outcomes for our children and families, in particular for urban and immigrant families. Programs like the federally funded Head Start, Community Development Block Grants, and thousands of nonprofits across the nation provide out-of-school-time academic and non-cognitive skill development programs for children. However, most programs focus on individual children, without considering the context in which children live – the family and their communities.

The long-held tendency of social service programs to work with individuals rather than families has created uncoordinated and siloed prevention, intervention, and treatment programs and has failed to move families out of poverty and improve educational outcomes for children. To counter this siloed approach, organizations like the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC) are, increasingly, providing services for whole families within the context of their communities.

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THE ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN BOSTON

The fragmented approach to social service delivery is especially detrimental for the most vulnerable urban neighborhoods – those with high poverty, communities of color, and immigrant residents. In greater Boston, the Asian American community fits all three categories. As the fastest-growing population group in Massachusetts with a 46.9 percent growth from 2000 to 2010, the Asian population is 5.3 percent of the overall state population, with growth driven by immigration rather than birth (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). And although a small percentage immigrate to the United States as high-skilled workers, many Asians immigrate through family reunification and arrive with little to no English – a factor critical for newcomers to achieve economic stability in the United States. In 2009, 31 percent of Asian Americans in the greater Boston area lived in poverty – a rate that is not significantly different from the 1990 Census – compared with 19 percent for all Boston residents and 9.5 percent for White residents (Boston Foundation 2011).

This high poverty rate is masked by the bimodality of the Asian American population's demographics. At one end of the spectrum are the majority: the high-need, low-skilled, low-income, and poorly educated immigrants who come for economic opportunities and family reunification. At the other end are the minority: highly educated, high-skilled, and moderate- to high-income immigrants who come for academic and economic opportunities. This bimodal construction fuels the Asian “model minority” myth while concealing the poverty and risk for a large number of Asian immigrants.

Furthermore, more than 68 percent of Asian Americans in Massachusetts are immigrants, with eight out of ten speaking a language other than English

at home. Older immigrants report a higher rate of speaking English not well or not at all (Institute for Asian American Studies 2012). This limited English fluency not only has implications for supporting children's English acquisition but also impacts access to educational, social service, and health supports, unless they are provided in the parents' native language (Hernandez, Marotz & Takamishi 2009).

THE BOSTON CHINATOWN NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER FAMILY SERVICES PROGRAM

The Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC) addressed these issues through designing a family-centered approach grounded in culturally and linguistically competent social services. BCNC began experimenting with program models from the mid 1990s to the 2000s through a series of federal demonstration grants and is now integrating this strengths-based approach as the backbone of the organization's theory of change. As a community-based social service organization that provides intergrated, multigenerational programs, BCNC's mission is to ensure that the community's children, youth, and families have the resources and support needed to achieve greater economic success and social and physical well-being.

Out of this history grew BCNC's Family Services program. Evolving from BCNC's work in developing parenting components for its children and youth programs, the Family Services program is designed to provide comprehensive, holistic support for parents in the community as well as parents of children in BCNC's early education, out-of-school time, and youth programs. BCNC's coordinated parenting support, integrated with programming that supports children and family outcomes, ranges from special education support and case

POPULATION SERVED BY BCNC

BCNC has served the community for forty-four years. Its core constituency is Asian immigrants, primarily ethnic Chinese with high needs, low income, and limited English proficiency. BCNC serves more than 2,000 people a year from age four months to seniors, the majority on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Of those, 33 percent are engaged in multiple BCNC programs or services, and 23 percent have one or more family members also attending BCNC programs. For children and youth, the average length of engagement in BCNC programs is six years, with a small minority attending over ten years. For adults, some are engaged daily over three years while learning English, with some in family services engaged over eight or more years. Demographics of BCNC participants are as follows:

- 77 percent do not speak English as a primary language at home
- 52 percent have been in the United States for less than five years
- 45 percent are children under the age of nineteen
- 73 percent of all children and youth receive free or reduced-price school lunch

management, counseling to parenting workshops, nutrition and cooking, and leadership development. (See sidebar for demographics of the population served by BCNC.)

AN ASSET-BASED APPROACH

Grounded in family systems theory, BCNC's Family Services program model is based on the tenet that families comprise a system or unit with individual components that both interact with one another and are interdependent on each other to function as a whole. With this interdependence in mind, programming is developed to support parents (95 percent of whom do not speak English) in identifying their own needs, bolstering their ability to draw on their strengths to parent in a new cultural context, and developing the skills to help their family progress.

The parents bring a number of strengths based on their experience, knowledge, and beliefs. Eastern and Western parenting practices are very different. Therefore, our program

draws on cultural norms and expectations and uses these as a starting point to teach new bicultural norms – in order to introduce new skills, but also to reduce parenting (and child) relationship stress. Some of the strengths we build on and the differences we explore are:

- *Expressions of love.* Asian parents tend to express affection through fulfilling children's basic needs, like providing food, shelter, and clothing. We build on parents' desire to demonstrate affection by introducing the ways that different expressions of love, including verbal and physical expression, can nurture family relationships.
- *Discipline.* Asian parents expect children to have self-discipline, and they believe that a child's good behavior is a reflection on the family and the quality of parenting. We build on parents' desire to have well-behaved children by teaching the fundamentals of child development and behavior modification strategies that reinforce positive parent-child interactions.

- *Concept of self.* Asian parents value family, group, and community systems and value family priorities above individual priorities. We build on the desire to impart strong family values and explore the different “concepts of self” with parents in order to increase understanding of individual differences and build understanding within the family.

Staff work with each parent to understand what his or her personal strengths and values are – it could be as simple as a desire to provide opportunity for his or her children. Through coaching and training, staff help the parents understand how they can accomplish this by integrating new skills into their toolkit, including listening to their children and understanding their struggles in a new culture. Part of the strengths-based approach is that we believe parents know their children best and that most parents want to provide the best opportunities for their children. Therefore, parents set their own goals in the program, and staff support the parents in gaining the skills, knowledge, or confidence they need to attain their goals.

We also utilize the Parenting Journey curriculum,¹ which helps parents understand how they were parented as a tool to help them think concretely about the impacts on their own parenting style and values. Our immigrant parents (or even our second-generation parents) grew up with very different parenting styles than the Western ones that are dominant in our culture. They have challenges with disciplining their children because American culture is more “permissive.”

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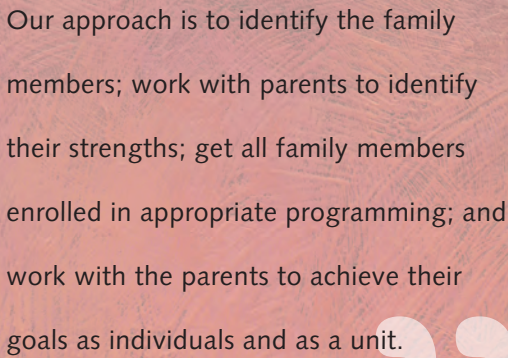
¹ Parenting Journey, offered in partnership with the Parenting Institute of the Family Center, Somerville, Massachusetts, is a strengths-based, twelve-week curriculum. For more information, see www.thefamilycenterinc.org/TheParentingJourneyTrainingInstitute/OurTrainingContent.html.

We build on the positives of the cultural norms that parents bring and help parents understand when those norms might have negative impacts.

This asset-based approach is grounded in the developing field of parent education and parent training programs that positively impact child behavioral and conduct outcomes (Ho et al. 2012). But there is a lack of research on programs developed for ethnic immigrant communities and the impact of culture on parenting expectations. In particular, the Chinese immigrant community has not been adequately represented in parent training research (Lau 2011), with the exception of programs based in Hong Kong – but these programs, though culturally competent, cannot address the issues related to immigration. The stress of immigration, and working in and learning new societal norms while parenting in a new cultural environment, is a challenge for the increasingly large numbers of immigrants to the United States. These immigrant communities are in need of programs that support the assets they bring to parenting in this new environment while also teaching new skills.

Supporting Parenting Goals

BCNC’s Family Services program was developed to fill these gaps. Designed and managed by bicultural staff trained as counselors and therapists, the program addresses parenting concerns and family issues within the context of supporting children’s outcomes. A common concern is that immigrant parents do not understand why their children are not listening to them or behaving well. Typically, the older the child gets, the more challenging the bicultural disconnect can become. Staff understand the issues at play: parents are used to the traditional, hierarchical, group/family-dominated relationship where children are expected to follow



Our approach is to identify the family members; work with parents to identify their strengths; get all family members enrolled in appropriate programming; and work with the parents to achieve their goals as individuals and as a unit.

the wishes of the parents and to not challenge or question authority. On the other hand, the children grow up in American society and are exposed to individualism, expected to have self-direction, and encouraged to be creative and self-expressive. Generally, children adopt American values, and parents want their children to keep Chinese or Asian values.

Understanding this dynamic, BCNC's children and youth programs are designed to support home culture while exploring American culture and ultimately integrating both. The Family Services program does the same for their parents. Family outcomes are achieved by meeting the individual needs in a coordinated fashion.

For example, an eight-year-old boy is in our afterschool program, his thirteen-year-old sister is in our youth program, and their mother is in parenting workshops in our Family Services program. The family has been in the United States for four years. The daughter stopped eating lunch because she was embarrassed by the Chinese lunches that her mother packed. The son was overweight and his pediatrician wanted him to lose weight. Both children were unhappy at mealtimes, and it was causing stress in the family, because their mother believed in the cultural norm that well-fed children are

well-loved children. So she bought fast food to make her children happy.

Our Family Services staff became aware of the issues (either through parent, BCNC afterschool and youth program staff, or a referral from the pediatrician) and invited the mother in for an update on her family. We identified the mother's goals for her children: healthy eating habits and a better relationship. The mother enrolled in two other activities that Family Services offers: "Rock Your Body," a program designed for young children who are overweight, where her son can engage in physical, fun games with other children; and "East Meets West" cooking class, designed to teach Asian parents nutrition and how to cook healthy versions of American food focused on plant-rich, whole-grain, low-sugar recipes. The daughter received support from BCNC's youth program and engages in workshops and activities designed to build self-understanding, an understanding of Asian American history, and youth development. The son enjoyed the activities introduced to him in "Rock Your Body" and has begun to slim down. The mother learned about balanced nutrition, how to cook Western recipes that the kids love, and how to modify her expectations of equating food with love.

In this example, the presenting issue was food and nutrition based, but we see everything from domestic violence and mental illness to gambling addiction or special needs like autism spectrum disorders and Down's syndrome. With all cases, our approach is the same: identify the family members, work with parents to identify their strengths (in the example those would be love of her children, desire to have them be well-nourished, and desire to have a good relationship with them); get all family members enrolled in appropriate programming; and work with the parents to achieve their goals as individuals and as a unit.

Developing Parent Leaders and Advocates

Since many of BCNC's programs are grounded in education, the organization has developed close working relationships with the schools serving the majority of Boston's Chinese ELLs, delivering programming in the school during the school day and after school. The relationship blossomed to the Boston Public School (BPS) district, through a partnership with the Office of Community and Family Engagement and BPS's Parent University, which adopted BCNC's Parent Solutions I (PS-1) curriculum introducing immigrant parents to the American education system and Boston Public Schools. Part of a four-part curriculum series, the Parent Solutions curriculum focuses on topics of importance for parents new to American education, such as how to navigate the education system, the special education process, school expectations of parental support, how to support children's learning, and monitoring Internet usage and screen time (see sidebar on this page).

In 2010, because of our deepening work with individual schools and the district, the Family Services program developed a fourth curriculum (PS4) to support parent peer leadership and mentoring, with the goal of developing parent advocates and parent leaders for the community. Since the organization believes in an asset-based approach and has both formal and informal mentoring, the Family Services program incorporates both these elements into their model. Parent advocates are trained in the parent education component of our program, but it is not unusual that these parents have taken part in all three of our program components, because most of the families we see have multiple needs.² (For an example of how a participant in other programs became a community leader and advocate, see the sidebar on page 44.)

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² BCNC's Family Services program's three major components are parent education, family- and child-based health and wellness education, and family-based stabilization and short-term case management.

THE PARENT SOLUTIONS WORKSHOP SERIES

This workshop series consists of four curriculums designed to bring parents from basic introduction to Boston Public Schools to parent advocacy and engagement. Our core belief is that educated and knowledgeable parents are their own best advocates, and our curriculums are designed to provide parents with the information and understanding of each issue so that they are knowledgeable and can speak their minds. Each curriculum series spans four to six weeks and targets Chinese-speaking parents (although BCNC has developed an English version of PS1 to use with all parents). Parents may attend some or all four of the series. Our goal is to have parents enter PS1 curriculum and go through all four curriculums, which takes about one year.

PS1: Introduction to BPS and the American education system. Goal: knowledge and confidence talking to school administrators and teachers.

PS2: Understanding Special Education. Goal: knowledge and confidence working with teachers to best support their child's learning. In many cases, parents in PS2 work with BCNC staff to put an IEP in place. They also learn the skills to monitor the implementation of the IEP.

PS3: How to Support Children's Learning. Goal: knowledge and confidence to use technology and other strategies to support child's learning.

PS4: Parent Advocacy and Engagement. Goal: knowledge and confidence to affect systemwide policies. They also learn to share their own stories as learning tools for other parents.

MRS. WU BECOMES A COMMUNITY LEADER AND ADVOCATE

Mr. and Mrs. Wu (names have been changed) enrolled their one-and-a-half-year-old daughter Lily in BCNC's bilingual early education program, Acorn. The family had been in the United States for a year, and they also had a six-year-old son, Will. Neither parent spoke English. Mr. Wu worked in a restaurant and was only at home on Mondays, leaving Mrs. Wu as the primary caretaker. Within a couple of weeks, Acorn staff identified Lily's challenge with speech and language, referred her for an assessment, and identified her as hearing impaired. Acorn staff put together early intervention services for Lily, helped Mrs. Wu understand what was happening, and referred her to our Family Services program for additional support.

For the next year, Mrs. Wu was a regular visitor to our Acorn director's office to get help translating letters and learning how to navigate the education/health/special needs system. She was constantly frustrated and angry, or crying and desperate. The Acorn director offered to help her enroll in English classes to communicate with Lily, who would begin to learn American Sign Language. Mrs. Wu disclosed to BCNC staff that she and her husband were illiterate in their native language of Chinese. The Acorn director encouraged Mrs. Wu to enroll in BCNC's newly developed Parent Solutions 1 curriculum, and she became one of BCNC's first parents to attend the training.

In year three, Mrs. Wu enrolled her oldest son Will in BCNC's afterschool program and had a third child, John, who was also diagnosed with hearing impairment. Mrs. Wu continued to attend the Family Services workshops as they were developed and began helping staff identify gaps and areas that could improve. Because of the family's multiple needs, their goals were continually updated to reflect Mrs. Wu's growth and confidence, but staff always accompanied Mrs. Wu to school meetings as interpreter and advocate.

John entered Acorn at one and a half years old. Will, now about eleven years old, studied American Sign Language and began to act as the interpreter between the younger children and the parents. In the Wus' fifth year of engagement with BCNC, Mrs. Wu was a parent volunteer and actively engaged with the Family Services program, recruiting parents and helping facilitate the Parent Solutions workshops. Family Service staff told Mrs. Wu that having Will as the interpreter for his siblings was not healthy and convinced her to enroll in BCNC's adult English as a Second Language program, placing her with a tutor to provide extra support. Will enrolled in BCNC's youth program. Eventually, Mrs. Wu began learning some American Sign Language, and both Lily and John received hearing implants.

Now, thirteen years later, Mrs. Wu has intermediate-level written and oral English skills, knows American Sign Language, and is still an active parent leader and volunteer. She has joined her children's parent council, served a term on the Boston Public Schools Special Needs Parent Advisory Council (SPEDPAC), advocates for her children within their school, and continues to recruit for BCNC's Family Services program and help train parents in the community. She also has started advocating for other non-English-speaking parents in the community and is a vocal supporter of the rights of language-minority special-needs families. Her children are doing well. Will graduated high school, completed BCNC's youth College Access Program, received a \$1,500 stipend for college, and just completed his first year of community college. Lily and John attend a public school for the hearing impaired, and both children are active learners and meeting their academic goals; Lily is entering ninth grade and John is entering sixth grade.

Over the years, Mrs. Wu's goals have changed from learning about special needs to organizing special-needs parents to have a voice. Personally, she has grown from a parent who regularly came to staff in tears to a strong advocate for her own needs, her children's needs, and the needs of the community. And her family has grown from one with a lot of anxiety and yelling to one in which the children are supported and heard.

The development of the advocacy and leadership curriculum was timely. With the overwhelming majority of BCNC's Family Service parents relying on BPS to provide a quality education for their children, parents were eager to find a forum to use their skills and express their needs, hopes, and wishes. Though small in number, these parent leaders develop their skill as peer advocates and work as volunteer peer mentors to support the forty parents who regularly participate in ongoing programming. With six parents trained as advocates, BCNC joined the Boston United for Students coalition, and parents engaged with the City in the latest Boston Teachers Union contract negotiations – providing an immigrant parent perspective to the process.

BCNC also partnered with the BPS Office of Community Engagement & Circle of Promise to ensure the community's parents had representation and voice in the City's External Advisory Committee (EAC) process. The mayor charged the EAC to develop a new school assignment process, but parents (including ours) also wanted to develop quality in our children's schools. Through this process, staff and the trained parent leaders organized and recruited over 130 Chinatown parents to participate in a series of meetings with BPS officials about the school assignment process, as well as access and quality issues in general. The overwhelming majority of these parents do not speak English, and seldom have the opportunity to speak with district level representatives about their concerns. With BCNC staff and parent leaders facilitating small and large group discussions in their native language, parents advocated with the district for their own children as well as for the community.

Though district representatives may have been at first unfamiliar and a bit uncomfortable with conducting reverse translation meetings (meetings were held in Chinese dialects and reverse translated into English via live translation), parent confidence was visibly bolstered by the ability to speak in their native language. The results were heartening and motivating. Once an under-represented group in making district-level impact, Chinese-speaking ELL parents became one of the

largest and most vocal parent groups in the EAC process. For the parents and parent leaders, exercising their right to voice their opinion and question process is an invaluable and empowering step in becoming an active and engaged participant in American society.

The key concerns the parents raised were:

- The district must focus less on the transportation issue and more on the school quality issue. Parents want good schools, no matter where they are.
- Parents want a safe neighborhood for the school, and they want accessibility. Not all parents drive.
- Parents want someone at the school who speaks their language, so they can communicate with staff. They also want information sent home in their native language.

The EAC process was not designed to address parent concerns, but the parents succeeded in getting the district to hear their voices. In addition to completing the EAC's original goal of developing a student assignment plan, the district also created a School Quality Working Group to take up the parents' charge to look at school quality as well as student assignment.

LOOKING AHEAD: REPLICATING THE MODEL FOR OTHER IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

BPS is serving an increasing number of ELL students as Boston's demographics continue to change. And though BCNC's Family Services program is primarily serving Chinese-speaking Asian immigrants, we have hopes to partner with other immigrant communities to replicate the model and create opportunities in all immigrant communities so that parents can actively foster and voice their own needs and advocate for their families, as well as the communities they live in.

For more information about the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, see <http://bcnc.net>.

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