

# Teaching the Immigrant Child: Application of Child Development Theories

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**Abstract** Immigrant children are an under-researched yet a steadily growing group. It is therefore compelling for practitioners to understand challenges these children are likely to encounter in the classroom so as to effectively meet their needs. In this article various theoretical perspectives of prominent child development theories are analyzed in an attempt to understand immigrant children in the classroom. Theories of Maslow, Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner are explicitly discussed. Some suggestions for practice are also provided.

**Keywords** Theories of child development · Immigrant children · Diversity · Young children · Classroom practice · English language learners

Immigrant children are the fastest growing segment in the US child population (Capps et al. 2006; Reid 2001; Landale and Oropesa 1995; Takanishi 2004). It is estimated that around 1 million immigrants enter the US each year, with many being at the childbearing age and having high fertility rates (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Reid 2001). One in five

children are immigrants in public schools such as in California (Capps et al. 2006). This demographic as well as the challenges reported in dealing with immigrant children in many classrooms implies the need for thorough understanding of this growing yet less researched segment of the US school population. Much of the research done on immigrants is mostly on Hispanic and ESOL population; however, the immigrant population is very varied comprising of many groups of different culture heritage. In addition, majority of current immigrant children are predominantly from developing countries with extremely heterogeneous characteristics in different aspects. This heterogeneity makes previously used strategies on educating immigrant children ineffective. As a result, application of prominent child development theories provides pertinent guidelines to help educators understand immigrant children and assist them to do well in the classroom. The following paragraph provides a brief description of the current immigrant population.

A significant number of immigrant children in our schools today are English language learners (ELL). These children are learning to speak English while speaking several other languages including their native languages. It is estimated that there are over 200 languages spoken in America today (Capps et al. 2006). Additionally, immigrant children have extremely divergent beliefs and experiences when compared to children born in America as well as earlier immigrants. A significant number of immigrant children also come from poor families and homes where their parents have limited education (Milano Graduate School 2004). All these factors make adjustments in the classroom harder both for the teacher and the children (Onchwari et al. 2008). Even with the myriad of challenges facing this segment of the population, about 20% of this population is well educated, within upper to middle socioeconomic status and their children generally

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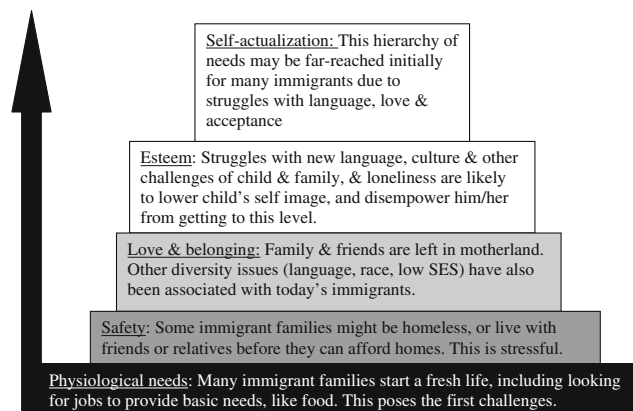
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adjust better in the school setting. This article is intended to stimulate reflections on the needs of immigrant children in US schools today. In addition, the article provides pertinent ideas and suggestions to help educators understand immigrant children. Some of the factors explored in this paper apply to children in general as opposed to immigrant children only, but attempts have been made to use illustrations that highlight factors unique to some immigrant children. It is critical that early childhood practitioners understand the situations of the children in their care, identify information from this article that is relevant to their students/clients, and use it appropriately.

Theories have long been used to inform and guide practice. Specifically, a limited number of theoretical models of child development have stood the test of time in providing proven frameworks for understanding all children's development and learning. In this paper six relevant theories are examined with suggestions for application to immigrant children in the classroom. The six theories are: Maslow's Needs Hierarchy, Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Erikson's psychosocial theory, Piaget's cognitive theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. This list of theories is by no means exhaustive but is a critical point of departure in an attempt to understand immigrant children.

### Abraham Maslow's Needs Hierarchy Theory

Maslow's theory is of great significance when it comes to understanding today's immigrant children. Many current immigrants come from developing countries and bring insufficient startup capital to help them settle down in the new land (Milano Graduate School 2004). As a result, they struggle to get food, clothing and shelter—basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy. Details of Maslow's needs of hierarchy are provided in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1** Maslow's need's hierarchy and the immigrant child

Assuming that the children's biological needs (at the bottom of the needs hierarchy) are satisfied (food and shelter), these children have to struggle to get their second need in the hierarchy (i.e. love) met. More often than not, these children have to struggle for love and attention from their peers and teachers. Today's immigrants are mostly people of color (Capps et al. 2006), adding another aspect of difference and disadvantage in a predominantly racially white society. This racial difference adds to a feeling of more isolation in the classroom or even in the children's neighborhoods. Often, an immigrant child's performance is affected by these factors long before he or she can form close friendships with classmates (Milano Graduate School 2004) who could support him or her. Close relationships provide children with a secure base that enables them move to the next level in the hierarchy. If this is missing, the child is likely to underperform in school. The whole situation is worsened if the parents themselves are struggling to cope and are not available to help their children develop a secure base from home (Milano Graduate School 2004). Some immigrant children may become unsuccessful in going beyond the third level in the hierarchy of needs.

The circumstances that a child's family is faced with, such as the struggle to obtain basic needs and wants, affect the immigrant child. For instance, an immigrant child's ability to access basic needs may be hampered by incapability of parents to attain proper documentation to secure a job in the new land, language issues or lack of education/skills required to perform a designated job. While the needs and wants of children might seem to be universal across the globe, the immigrant child has to overcome multiple barriers to access what other children have easy access to. Relocation issues, new environment issues, and other factors also contribute to the predicament facing many immigrant children.

### Sigmund Freud's Psychosexual Theory

Mrs. Mattice, a kindergarten teacher, has noticed that during center time, Mae, an African child, is often in conflict with other children. On the days that Mae is dressed in his African outfit, he walks from one center to another proudly showing off his outfit. This behavior is not viewed overly negatively in his culture. The other children have, on occasion, complained that he interferes with their work. Mrs. Mattice has spoken to Mae but he has not stopped these behaviors. According to Freud's theory (Freud 1910, 1964) Mae is finding ways to satisfy his own needs for recognition and acceptance. When Nathan, a second grader, wants to play with others he just jumps in. The other children see this as rude and inappropriate. But in Nathan's view, he is expressing his need to be part of the

play. After coming to America, Mae and Nathan feel they have lost recognition and friendships. While all children have the need for recognition and acceptance, manifestations of these needs by the immigrant children can be culturally shocking to the American children and lend themselves to misinterpretation.

Effectively understanding children's behavior and actions requires teachers looking at the driving forces behind students' behaviors and actions respectively. The teachers in the above scenario could teach Mae and Nathan culturally appropriate strategies to meet their needs without irritating their peers in the classroom. The teachers might also need to help other children understand cultural differences in the classroom; explain to the other children that children from different cultures have different ways of expressing themselves and the need for all children to learn and maintain respect for all cultures.

### **Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory**

Mia, a 4-year-old preschooler joined a Head Start program right after they moved from Mexico to a small town in Minnesota. Mia showed all the signs of secure attachment—she had obviously developed trust and self-confidence. Although initially she could not speak a word in English, she was very amicable and was quickly accepted by her classmates and teacher. She was not afraid to explore her environment and express herself with signs, combined with some words in Spanish and within few weeks, English words. It was apparent that Mia was transitioning smoothly and was likely to have a successful schooling.

According to Erikson's theory, children progress through eight universal psychosocial stages (Erikson 1950). His first three stages: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame, and initiative versus guilt relate to the early childhood stages of development. It is understood that if children go through these stages successfully, they develop positive dispositions of trust, autonomy, and initiative. Immigrant children who develop trust during Erikson's infancy stage are likely to have an easier time developing trusting relationships in the new land. On the other hand, those who did not have this opportunity earlier on may feel even more detached and insecure in the new environment. These feelings of insecurity and mistrust are likely to make their adjustment process extremely difficult.

On the other hand, even a trusting child might be thrown off if he or she feels unaccepted in the new environment. Dapi, a 5-year-old boy relocated with his family to America from Niger, and joined kindergarten with much enthusiasm. He felt secure enough to freely explore his environment and play with the other children, but somehow

some of his interaction styles and expressions were not considered appropriate by the teacher and classmates. He reported to his parents the feeling of being hated by the teacher and children in his classroom. This probably affected his performance and, at the end of the year, the teacher recommended he be retained in kindergarten one more year. Dapi's parents have a different view of him. They feel that he was the smartest of their four children and that the school system had taken away his self-confidence, hope, and a fair amount of opportunity to start out right. They are very bitter parents of immigrant children.

Some immigrant children come from environments where passivity and interdependence is nurtured (Milano Graduate School 2004). This is in contrast to those children who have grown up in environments such as America where parents encourage children to be independent from an early age. Different cultures have different views of autonomy, initiative and industry. The different activities and indicators of these important virtues may also differ. It is therefore critical that teachers understand and acknowledge immigrant children's culture and work around it as opposed to striving to assimilate them into the new culture (Akiba 2007).

It is critical for teachers and school administrators to assess a child's level of emotional security and self-esteem and help the child, as necessary, feel a sense of belonging in the class. Children's development of initiative and industry is supported in environments that accept them for who they are. Acceptance helps children gain confidence in their abilities. Initially, many immigrant children may be quiet and withdrawn in the classrooms as they try to understand their environment and develop confidence to initiate activities and express ideas. Teachers should take note of this and be committed to acknowledging each child's fears. By helping children overcome these fears, they help them build confidence that is primary to survival in the new environments.

### **Jean Piaget's Cognitive Theory**

Mia (also described in this paper under Erikson's theory), a child who had just moved from Mexico, walked into a Head Start classroom and quickly started exploring the environment and playing with the different toys like any 4-year-old child would. Even with the cultural differences and language barrier, one could tell from the way Mia explored her environment that her cognitive skills were developmentally on target. Often, immigrant children are quickly mislabeled as being behind cognitively and are often recommended for retention and other services that are not matched to their cognitive levels. This is where Piaget's theory comes into play.

According to Piaget's theory (Siegler 1991; Piaget 1960), we can understand children's development and their view of the world by looking at their actions and words. His four stages demonstrate children's growing understanding of their world. While experiences that help different children construct knowledge are different, the concepts and cognitive sophistication they acquire through manipulating their environment and thoughts are universal. Immigrant children bring a different set of experiences and perspectives on understanding the world. For instance, a child from Africa may have encountered different fruits when compared to an American child. Tropical fruits such as guavas, loquats, and passion-fruit are common, for instance, in many areas in Kenya. However in the U.S. these fruits may not be available and a child's perspective of the fruit family is challenged when they come across kiwis, grapefruit, and for some, apples! A teacher might erroneously assume that the immigrant child has challenges with basic classification. After all, an apple is among the first fruits a 2-year-old in America would easily name—even classify. On the other hand, a child who understands basic classification of a fruit will quickly assimilate new fruits into his or her existing schema of what constitutes fruit. According to Piaget, this new schema causes the child to be in a state of disequilibrium, which leads to accommodation of new knowledge. Teachers need to understand that while some immigrant children are often quiet and withdrawn in their classrooms, they are experiencing a state of disequilibrium of the different concepts they are viewing or learning and sometimes are in a state of confusion as they try to assimilate the new knowledge into their old existing knowledge. This does not, however, mean that immigrant children should be retained or placed in cognitively lower level classes by virtue of their lack of understanding some aspects of the new culture, including language (Akiba 2007; Taylor 1996). Such practices are demeaning to children and often lead to more failure (Akiba 2007). Additionally, Piaget emphasizes the importance of language as a tool for facilitating and expressing our thoughts, even though he does not see language as a prerequisite to cognitive development. With sufficient and caring support, immigrant children can easily accommodate and assimilate new information into their existing schema, including learning the language to use in representing their thoughts.

### Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

When Dapi, a 5-year-old boy from Niger (also described under Erikson's theory), confidently walked into a kindergarten classroom in America, ready to learn, he also brought with him expectations from his culture. He was

more spontaneous in his actions and liberally touched the other children when playing with them. That is how he and his friends played back in his country. The other children and the teacher did not like his behavior and the teacher quickly asked Dapi to respect the other children's personal space, a new concept which Dapi had a hard time comprehending and practicing. Dapi was not given enough time to learn this new rule and his desk was sooner than later separated from the other children's. Dapi viewed this as a big punishment, not to mention a form of rejection by his teacher and classmates. Soon afterwards, he was reluctant to go to school because he did not feel accepted.

Vygotsky's theory is relevant to the immigrant child's education and experiences. Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of taking into account one's past experiences in the learning process (Couchenour and Chrisman 1999). For immigrant children, their understanding of the world is based on beliefs, customs, and skills learned from their home cultures—usually very different. The teacher needs to meet immigrant children at their cultural and cognitive levels and then proceed to assist them to add new learning into what they bring to the table (Akiba 2007). As a result, it is imperative for the teacher to strive and understand the children's culture as well as the experiences they bring into the classroom (Akiba 2007; Baghban 2007). A preschool and kindergarten teacher should review the common associations to letters of the alphabet to make sure they are meaningful to the child's experiences. 'A' for apple, 'B' for bear, for instance, do not mean anything to many children born in an African village because these letters do not constitute these children's past experiences. Vygotsky also emphasizes on learning from more capable peers. Pairing children with others from the same culture, even if from other grade levels, has proved to make gains in immigrant children's learning. If children from the same culture are not available, any well-matched peers could do (Cole 1996). The teacher will, however, need to coach these significant others or peers so that they are culturally sensitive when working with the immigrant children (Baghban 2007).

### Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

Dapi has to learn that while it is alright to liberally touch children from his home country, Niger, it is not alright to do so in school during playtime (conflict of two primary systems is called mesosystem). Mimi, an 8-year-old has to deal with her mother's irritability at home after her employer has continually expressed his frustration because she is culturally not appropriate at work (exosystem), and Mia, a 6-year-old boy has to face the fear of being deported back to Mexico following new immigration laws and recurring

television and radio news on this law (macrosystem). Gazi, an 8-year-old girl from Rwanda has to live with the memories of the traumatizing experience of witnessing her grandfather's murder at their home when she was only four during the Rwanda massacre (chronosystems).

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, children's development is determined by both immediate and distant systems that typically influence each other. He proposed five systems as being players in a child's development: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

The Microsystems, that is, the immediate environments of children include the family, school, religious groups, etc. Experiences in the family and at home are poles apart, putting immigrant children in a somewhat dual-personality position. Cultural experiences and expectations suddenly change and the children have to quickly understand the two institutions are different and adjust to meet their demands accordingly. This is extremely confusing and conflicting to the children. Teachers will need to help children transition well to their new learning environments. Importantly, teachers need to support these children by acknowledging and supporting their cultures.

Bronfenbrenner third level, the exosystem embraces other contexts and community factors that influence child development indirectly even though these settings do not necessarily contain the child (Arditti 2005). In many cases, new obligations and the need to work may keep some immigrant family members away from one another, and in some cases, children are left alone for hours (Suarez-Orozco and Todorova 2003). This is unfortunate especially since newly migrated children need more support as they make meaning of their new experiences in the systems outside home. In this case, policies such as work expectations (an example of an exosystem) in parent's place of work could affect child's development.

Macrosystems are the larger context in which all the other systems operate. Often these are defined not by physical environments but by the values, belief, policies, laws, and traditions shared among people and groups of people (Kostelnik et al. 2006). More relevant to the immigrant child are policies about bilingual education, NCLB Act, immigration laws, etc. These factors influence how immigrant children are viewed and treated in the schools. The current accountability system in the schools, for instance, may compromise individualized instruction for minority children.

Lastly is the chronosystem, which refers to events that occur within the life of the child. The process of migrating to a totally new and different country has major repercussions to the development of the child. The child has to go through a readjustment process, for better or for worse. Some immigrant families moved to America as refugees

due to war and other political conflicts. Some of the experiences children and adults from these families have undergone prior to relocating were traumatizing. Children from those immigrant families may depict some behaviors that could warrant some counseling (Table 1).

### What Teachers Can Do

- Be sensitive to children's struggles and their families: plan for teaching experiences that talk about family needs such as jobs and family, share stories of challenges of obtaining jobs and help children understand that things will be okay. Support children's parents by directing them to community resources and offer reassurance to their children.
- Learn about children's culture and teach acceptance (De Atilas and Allexaht-Snyder 2003). Through sharing knowledge of immigrant children's culture, both immigrant and non immigrant children learn cultural differences and similarities that will help them understand why they display different behaviors in different situations. Discuss some possibilities of why Mia or Nathan acts differently and also share other relevant experiences from children of the dominant culture.
- Communicate clearly and enhance communication skills of immigrant children (De Atilas and Allexaht-Snyder 2003) since newly arrived immigrants are experiencing a new world altogether. The state of disequilibrium—trying to accommodate new concepts—can take a great toll on their ability to catch up with peers. Schedule one on one teacher time with them. Use varied assessment procedures to understand what they know or how they know it. Learn about what they know (e.g., different types of animals) and use this background to support their learning of other new concepts in the new world.
- Create opportunities to connect with each of these children. Interest in them as individuals. Plan for at least a daily special time that you can just talk to them. In this way you learn about their abilities in different ways than you may have thought or didn't know. It helps children to open up when they can share their difficulties with a caring teacher. One-to-one interaction with the teacher also spares them the embarrassment of not communicating clearly or in the standard mode in front of their peers.
- Ask children and parents things they would want to learn more about and try to support that. This may be either school related or general. The need for each individual to feel a sense of belonging to the new environment is always high. The sense of belonging as a basic need enables us all to seek for the higher



**Table 1** Summary of theories and their implications

Theory	Main ideas	Implication to Immigrant child
Freud's theory	Innate needs of acceptance and other basic needs influence behavior. The unconscious egoistic needs may cause unexpected, often inappropriate behaviors.	Some children may be challenged with establishing new friendships and acceptance; some may be withdrawn; may try to fit in, may use attention-seeking behaviors like aggression; may not articulate needs of acceptance because needs are in the unconscious. It is normal for children to be initially quiet and isolated as they master their new environment. Many feel safer observing from a distance and with support may soon jump in.
Erik Erikson's theory	Universal stages of development: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus doubt, initiative versus shame and doubt, industry versus inferiority. These traits are developed early in life but become lifetime traits.	Past environments that encouraged trust, autonomy, initiative, etc. make it easier to adjust in new environment—Autonomy, initiative and industry developed in different cultures might be depicted hence measured in different ways and forms from the American culture (e.g., passivity is not lack of confidence in many cultures).
Piaget	Cognitive stages are universal. Concepts of accommodation, assimilation, adaptation, and disequilibrium.	Cultural and language barriers under-represent immigrant children's cognitive capabilities. They go through a period of disequilibrium as they assimilate their new culture. Use of differentiated assessment is helpful in ascertaining actual cognitive capabilities.
Vygotsky	Learning occurs within a sociocultural setting through social interaction. Beliefs, values, experiences are part of the learning package. The ZPD: the teacher and peers role is critical. Language precedes thought.	Immigrant children have different experiences that need to be put into account/built onto in school. Use of people from child's culture (parents, older peers, and community people), and use of peers in general is helpful in helping them make connections between new culture and home culture. Learning language of new land is critical for the continued cognitive development. Teach children skills that are essential for their survival in new land.
Bronfenbrenner	Children leave in a complex environment within which there are systems that affect one another (e.g. home, school, parents' work place, policies, etc.).	There is often conflict between microsystems (school and home). This may cause confusion and slow adjustment. An understanding of systems unique to these immigrant and the situation of parents, their cultures, etc., is critical. It's very important to establish rapport with parents.
Maslow	Human beings' needs are hierarchical (starting with physiological—through self actualization). If basic needs are not met the individual strives to meet them before moving to the next hierarchy.	Initially many immigrant families struggle to meet basic needs (food and shelter). Many children may take time to form friendships and feel accepted in classroom. This may affect their academic performance. Sufficient support from teachers and other students in their classrooms would help these children move up Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

hierarchy needs such as to learn. Children want to belong in a wider sense. You can have a checklist of common things children at this stage relate to (such as things to do over the weekend or children's favorite story books at this stage), ask parents what they would want to learn about that will support their child's education. Try to provide this support as it may meet children's needs discussed in the theories above.

- Teach parents how they can have communication with their children daily once they leave school. Children are likely to share their concerns, fears, accomplishments, and sources of confusion about what went on in school each day. Then connect with parents in such a way that they can freely share with you about this. Get parents' opinions about the issues that children discuss with

them. Work on a plan together with parents about to handle each situation. Respect parent's ideas about issues but, above all, educate them when you feel the way they handle situations is not appropriate; for example, parenting practices that put the child's healthy development at risk (e.g., corporal punishment).

### Summary

Theories of child development are useful in understanding the plight of children in any situation. Today's under-researched immigrant population is characterized by heterogeneity in terms of language, culture, social-economic status (but are predominantly poor), and other factors.

Application of theories gives us a better understanding of this population of children. Maslow's theory puts into our attention that immigrant children have to satisfy basic needs before they can perform well in class. On the other hand, Erikson, Freud, and Vygotsky see these children's past experiences as being a big part of who they are and how it is critical to understand their past experiences and strive to treat them within some context of their past experiences. Piaget informs us that these children may be diverse but nevertheless undergo universal stages of cognition and should therefore be treated in ways that acknowledge and affirm their cognitive levels. The family, schools, media, society in general, and policies that govern the society as a whole, according to Bronfenbrenner, influence how immigrant children are perceived and treated. Each theory has its unique, yet relevant contribution and should be used in combination rather than in isolation when making decisions that affect immigrant children in and outside the classrooms.

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