

Taking an *Advocacy With* Approach to Better Support Families

Lianne Fisher

▼ Abstract

Lianne Fisher uses Paulo Freire's concept of *advocacy with* to lead family support practitioners to reflect on their position when offering help to program participants who are new to Canada. She explains the distinction between *advocacy with* and *advocacy for* and points out the assumptions that help givers sometimes make about help receivers. These assumptions may lead to stigmatizing and marginalizing the very people practitioners hope to support. *Advocacy with* requires that we recognize the beliefs, wants and desires of those individuals and families our services support. Fisher points out that beliefs about group characteristics are often socially constructed, that is, they are built up from media representations and social conversations, rather than based on inherent qualities of the individuals in question. For instance, people who have recently immigrated to Canada may be perceived and treated as innocent, naïve and passive, rather like children. In fact, they have had to show considerable commitment and initiative to complete the immigration process. Another way to approach the situation is to consider that different cultures have different knowledges. Fisher also discusses how social constructions about childhood affect the way we feel about putting children in the role of cultural broker. Children are often required to not only interpret language but also explain cultural practices in exchanges between their parents and Canadian society. This role has positive and negative effects on children; it can raise their sense of efficacy, but it can also place a heavy burden on them. Children's active contribution to the family carries a similar double-edged possibility. Fisher argues that it is important to go beyond social constructions to look at the meaning of these activities for the individual child and family. Also, she suggests that supporting the child in the role and recognizing its importance for the family can help to reduce any negative impact. Furthermore, she acknowledges that her own child is a cultural broker for her in some situations and notes that the adult in this exchange also experiences discomfort. In conclusion, Fisher urges practitioners to critically reflect on their underlying beliefs about immigrating families in order to improve their practice and truly assist families to reach their goals.

I remember the teenage house party in England when I discovered that my host was poor. I went to the bathroom and there were cut-up squares of newspaper for toilet roll. How could I not have known my schoolmate was *poor* before that day? From then on I made a special effort around him. I spoke brightly and probably a little too loudly, included him in activities, made suggestions for his decorum, and once or twice touched his arm, as if to say “It’s okay, I understand.” I mean, it wasn’t his fault he was poor, was it? But then it seemed to me that after awhile his poorness got the better of him. He was rude and didn’t want to hang out with the group anymore. I didn’t understand where this had come from. After all, I was being nice to him. I didn’t make jokes behind his back about the newspaper; in fact I defended him. This schoolmate avoided me, rebuffed my *generous* overtures, and at times he would stare at me with such hostility that I remember being unnerved. I was only trying to help, and I didn’t think he was being very grateful. Despite my best intentions, it seemed there was nothing I could do.

Advocacy for or advocacy with

This memory came back to me years later at university when I was studying *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. A classroom discussion on Freire’s concept of *advocacy with* versus *advocacy for* allowed me to gain some insight into my own and my friend’s behaviour. I saw that I had perhaps made erroneous assumptions about my friend’s degree of wealth. Using newspaper squares for toilet paper is not a universal symbol of poverty; it was, however, outside my experience.

I had also assumed a position of authority over him. Believing him and his family to be poorer than me and mine, I believed that I then had the right—in fact, the duty—to help him better himself. I took the position of *advocacy for*, a patronizing position in which I felt I knew what was best for him, without knowing his circumstances.

In contrast, the idea of *advocacy with* looks at individuals, families and whole communities of people as having knowledge and insight about their own state of affairs and as having the capacity to generate solutions. In many instances where there are stressful, harmful and inequitable practices within a community, members of that community are working toward changing conditions (Freire, 2006; Waring, 2009). For example, women in Afghanistan continued to educate young

women when their schooling was outlawed, and they continue to work toward making education for women widespread and accepted (Turiel, 2005).

Attributing attitudes and characteristics

My teenage experience highlights two other issues. First, we may think that groups of individuals who are traditionally marginalized or recipients of support are supposed to be grateful for the services and resources they receive. Second, we often attribute attitudes displayed by individuals who do not accept our “help” to enduring internal character traits rather than interpreting them as a reaction to how we treat them socially. I interpreted my friend’s hostility as a sign he was ungrateful, but maybe he was reacting to my patronizing behaviour. I would have treated him very differently had I examined some of the assumptions I had made about him and his family’s use of newspaper. Instead of seeing his rude behaviour as typical of *poor* people, I might have understood it as a reaction to my putting myself in a superior position.

Our good intentions may marginalize and stigmatize the very individuals we hope to support. Communities and families are often seen as passive and unaware of their own circumstances. When we are trying to provide resources and services, it can be frustrating to have our best efforts rejected. Moreover, sometimes what is needed is in opposition to agency mandates, policies and procedures. For instance, a school board working group, which had been set up to address issues of discrimination, posed the question: “How do we respond to the black male student who shuns our attempts to involve him in Black History Month or a basketball game, when what he really needs is access to a quiet room and a prayer mat?” (Samuel et al, 2002, p. 4). Often services are provided without collaborating with the people we are trying to reach. Their participation is important; otherwise, communities and families are left with “outcomes for which they have no need” (Waring, 2009, p. 163).

In a discussion of children and immigrant families, Burman (2008) points to an important question about *advocacy with*: “How can we help in ways that do not require those whom we help to occupy a position of gratitude, or even to be or become like ‘us’” (p. 142). “Becoming more like us” can often be problematic for newly arrived families. Feelings

Advocacy with
requires that we
recognize the
beliefs, wants
and desires of
those individuals
and families our
services support.

of belonging and significance can be confused with being “the same as.” *Advocacy with* requires that we recognize the beliefs, wants and desires of those individuals and families our services support.

Social construction of beliefs

Our ability to be *advocates with* is often hampered by our own beliefs about the inherent characteristics of categories of people. For instance, some people might say that women are more emotional than men because of biologically determined hormonal differences. Similarly, in my relations with my teenage friend, I had a belief about how poor people “naturally” act. Social theorists have pointed out that such beliefs are often social constructions; that is, they are not rooted in any biological necessity but are in fact built up through what we see and hear in our society. A social constructivist approach asks that we look at how groups of people—women, men, children, white, black—are differentially represented in the newspapers and books we read, the TV programs and movies we watch, and the conversations that we hear around us in our daily life.

If our social construction about families who have immigrated defines them as naïve, uneducated and “in need of help,” we will provide services and support from an *advocacy for position* (Moss, & Petrie, 2002). Social constructions may give rise to a view of a particular category of people as “less civilized” or “naïve” if another category, for example, people having light skin and being from the Western hemisphere, is considered superior or more knowledgeable than others. Another way to see the situation would be to consider that different cultures may have different knowledges. It makes sense to provide support and resources to individuals as they interact in new cultural spheres. In order to improve delivery of social services and promote successful outcomes, it is important to reflect on the assumptions we hold and challenge them.

Challenging the assumptions we hold about groups of people is complicated by the fact that it is possible for social constructions to be in opposition to each other. On the one hand, children may be seen as wilful, uncontrollable, in danger of running wild without the guidance and help of society (think *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding). On the other hand, children may be defined as incomplete adults who are innocent, passive, blank slates who need to be cherished and filled with knowledge (e.g., Moss & Petrie, 2002; Stasiulis, 2002). The services we provide for children and the attitudes we hold about them will differ depending on how we construct the notion of “childhood.” I am not

suggesting that either construction is completely right or completely wrong. Extremes are useful for illustration, but rarely are they accurate.

The ideas of innocence, naivety and passivity are often applied not only to children but also to newly immigrated adults. These assumptions are troublesome, since in fact individuals seeking to immigrate typically need to be well-educated to gain entry to Canada. Moreover, they have shown considerable initiative and commitment to complete the application process. Parents often see immigration as a way to improve the lives of their children. In the case of refugee populations, it is estimated that four to five per cent have been victims of torture (Michultka, 2009). People who have witnessed war and displacement, people who have lived with policies that restrict practices or limit the number of children per family, are probably less naïve than I am. However, the fact remains that we have different kinds of knowledge. When notions of inexperience and naivety arise, it can be useful to ask the question: “In regards to what?” This may help prevent the application of universalistic social constructions to particular groups of people or to all facets of an individual’s life.

I am not suggesting an extreme cultural relativism where anything goes. But as Moss and Petrie (2006) note in reference to services for children:

Public provision...is not, and can never be, simply a technical subject whose main concern is efficient delivery of a commodity. Evaluation—judgements of value—is important: but before providing a referential framework for these judgements come critical questions concerning meaning and purpose...justice, democracy, power and relationships, all of which are inescapably ethical and political (p. 165).

Children as cultural brokers

Cultural brokering is one area where our social constructions can play a role in the services we provide for families and children who have immigrated. Cultural brokering can be defined as interpreting not just language but also cultural practices between different groups. In immigrant families, this job is often assumed by a child or adolescent who is called on to mediate between the parents and the new culture. Brokering takes place along a continuum from answering the household phone to reading labels at the grocery store to translating medical information in the doctor’s office. Children and adolescents have reported both positive and negative consequences from cultural brokering. For example, a young girl reports her excitement about helping her grandparent vote. In comparison, hav-

ing to translate sensitive materials in legal or medical situations is a source of stress for young people (Jones & Trickett, 2005). The fact that evidence is mixed regarding the outcomes of the cultural broker role for children does not necessarily mean that we have not found “the truth” yet. Rather, reports from children suggest that brokering has both positive components (e.g., feelings of efficacy) and negative components (e.g., a sense of burden) (Wu & Kim, 2009).

Some acts of cultural brokering can conflict with a construction of childhood as a period free of *mature* responsibilities and, reciprocally, of parents as protectors of childhood innocence. If we hold this view, cultural brokering may in some instances be seen as the adultification of children or a role reversal between a parent and child. What is our belief about whether it is appropriate for children to be taking on this role? Our answer may depend on what we believe is appropriate work for children. In fact, the definition of appropriate labour for children differs by culture, social class and gender. UNICEF (2009) estimates that 150 million 5 to 14 year old children worldwide are engaged in excessive child labour, defined as economic activity or household chores in excess of 28 hours per week. These data suggest that many other children must be working fewer hours, actively contributing to their families. For instance, children do chores in the home, play with and supervise younger siblings, feed the pets, put clothes in the laundry, and go grocery shopping with a parent. Contributing actively to the household and accepting increased responsibility with age are often seen as positive behaviours (Love & Buriel, 2007). Under such circumstances, children report feelings of pride, helpfulness and usefulness. Negative reports raise issues of the child feeling embarrassed, burdened and uncomfortable (Wu & Kim, 2009). Like cultural brokering, being called on to make an active contribution to the household can be both a positive and a negative experience about which children can have negative and positive feelings simultaneously.

Impact of cultural brokering

The worlds of children, like adults’ worlds, are not free from racism and discrimination. In one study, interviews with adolescents suggested that discrimination is a factor in negative outcomes of cultural brokering (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009) when they encounter social constructions that expect

newly immigrating families to assimilate. They may have to deal with people who feel that it is not appropriate for a child to act as cultural broker or to speak a “foreign” language in public. The negative stress these children experience is not due to the act of language brokering *per se*, but rather to the discrimination. In this instance, if our social construction of the situation makes us think that the family is placing an unfair burden on its children, we will conclude that the parents need to change their behaviour. We will not confront or challenge systemic discrimination in the wider community, and we will put the onus on the family to be become more like *us*.

Negative outcomes associated with cultural brokering are not always the result of discrimination. Research suggests that another reason children mention negative aspects is that it takes time from other activities, such as homework or socializing with peers (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009). Again, it is not the brokering in and of itself that is at issue.

Negative stress from cultural brokering seems to be buffered by family support (e.g., Wu & Kim, 2009). It is important that we provide support to families for the brokering task *per se*, especially if the family feels this is useful. However, it may turn out that we can best act by providing psychosocial support to the adolescent, or, for example, by working to “encourage parental support and recognition of [the] child’s role in family” (Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009, p. 413).

In addition, the literature suggests that cultural brokering activity decreases over time, the longer families are in their new country. Such changes would be an important indicator for assessing impact.

During my career I have worked to reduce discrimination and oppression, but social constructions can be powerful and it is not easy to step out of our socialization. When I thought of cultural brokering I thought of it as happening out there, to other people, newly immigrating families, for example. It does seem to be the case that the research literature typically looks at cultural brokering within families who have immigrated (e.g., Love & Buriel, 2007; Jones & Trickett, 2005; Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009; Wu & Kim, 2009). Then I realized I was buying into a stereotype. I did not want to see myself as placing a burden on my child, when in fact my son acts as a cultural broker for me, notably in matters relating to electronic games. Yes, there are differences and increased pressures in cultural brokering when a family has moved into

Critical reflection, thinking about what underlying beliefs we bring to our interactions and our jobs, is an important component of working with adults.

a different cultural setting. There is also evidence for positive outcomes of brokering or role reversal in families in general, not just families who have immigrated (Herrer & Maysless¹ as cited in Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009).

As well as thinking that cultural brokering was something that took place only in families who had immigrated, I realized that I had assumed that the associated stress was only for the cultural broker. Both my son and his father (who speak French and English) tell me that it is indeed at times stressful to play the broker role for me (a monolingual English speaker). On that note, I was struck by what a young participant said in research reported by Oznobishin and Kurman (2009). This daughter expressed feelings of discomfort that her mother was not able to function “as an adult” in some situations. For my part, I can empathize with the mother. There are times when I feel quite shameful and annoyed with my inability to function in French-speaking contexts. It can be incapacitating, leaving me with feelings of inadequacy as an adult. I think it is a disservice to parents to believe that they do not also feel some tension in regard to cultural brokering. They too may be working to generate solutions for tensions in their lives. We can be more useful if we work from a space of *advocacy with* to assist families in reducing any negative impacts of cultural brokering.

Critical reflection supports *advocacy with*

Our ability to *advocate with*, providing support through services and resources, can be enhanced by reflecting on our social constructions of groups of people, in other words the assumptions we take for granted. Critical reflection, thinking about what underlying beliefs we bring to our interactions and our jobs, is an important component of working with adults (Brookfield, 1995; Freire, 2006). Such reflection improves our chances of successfully facilitating the needs, wants and desires of families as they come to know and live within particular communities in Canada. In this way, our best intentions and better practices will avoid discriminating against and marginalizing the very individuals we hope to support.

Lianne Fisher is currently completing her M.A. in Child and Youth Studies at Brock University and graduated with an honours degree in Psychology from Simon Fraser University. She has co-authored publications and facilitated conference presentations in the areas of critical acculturation and child devel-

opment. Her theoretical and research interests are dialogic and sociocultural approaches to parent-child socialization, anti-oppression, diversity issues in education and mothering.

References

- Burman, E. (2008). *Developments: Child, image, nation*. Canada: Routledge.
- Brookfield, S. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- Freire, P. (2006). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing.
- Jones, C. J. & Trickett, E. J. (2005). Immigrant adolescents behaving as culture brokers: A study of families from the former Soviet Union. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 145(4), 405-427.
- Love, J. A. & Buriel, R. (2007). Language brokering, autonomy, parent-child bonding, biculturalism, and depression: A study of Mexican American adolescents from immigrant families. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 29(4), 472-491.
- Moss, P. & Petrie. (2006). *From Children's services to children's spaces: Public policy, children and childhood*. Canada: Routledge Falmer.
- Michultka, D. (2009). Mental health issues in new immigrant communities. In F. Chang-Muy & C. P. Congress (Eds.), *Social Work with immigrants and refugees: Legal issues, clinical skills and advocacy*. New York: Springer.
- Oznobishin, O. & Kurman, J. (2009). Parent-child role reversal and psychological adjustment among immigrant youth in Israel. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23(3), 405-415.
- Samuel, M., and the Issues Committee Writing & Development Team. (2002). Manifesting encouraging and respectful environments & the future we want. Issue papers on the ISMs. *IssuePaper #1 – Intersectionality: The future we want*. Fall, 2002. School Services and Staff Development, Peel District School Board.
- Stasiulis, D. (2002). The active child citizen: Lessons from Canadian Policy and the Children's Movement. *Citizenship Studies*, 6(4), 507-538.
- Turiel, E. (2005). Resistance and subversion in everyday life. In L. Nucci (Ed.) *Conflict, contradiction, and contrarian elements in moral development and education*, pp. 3-20. Mahway, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Waring, M. (2009). *I way to C the world: Writings 1984-2006*. Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Wu, N. H. & Kim, Y. S., (2009). Chinese American adolescents' perceptions of the language brokering experience as a sense of burden and sense of efficacy. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38, 703-718.

1. The report of this research is written in Hebrew and I rely on and appreciate Oznobishin & Kurman's translation.