

The role of culture in mentoring

Bernadette Ludwig

Refugee and immigrant children actively try to embrace the American culture, often to escape taunts and feelings of not belonging. However, once they reach home, they are frequently reprimanded by their parents for being too American. Many newcomer families fear that their children will become part of the new society too quickly and forget or dismiss their cultural heritage. Not surprisingly, refugee and immigrant youth feel that nobody can really understand what they are going through as they navigate between different cultures while trying to define their own lives, identities and destinies.

The Go-Betweener Mentoring Program, run by Culture Connect, Inc., matches refugee and immigrant youth with mentors who are first- or second-generation refugees or immigrants from the same (or similar) cultural background, and who speak the same home language. These mentors have themselves faced many of the same obstacles that the young refugee and immigrant youth are encountering. Even more importantly, the adults are living examples to the younger generation that there are ways to successfully bridge two seemingly differing cultures. The Go-Betweener mentor also plays an important role in being able to communicate with the parents in their native language. This not only puts parents at ease but also offers an opportunity to help them become more at ease and better connected to resources in the larger community.

"I understand what it is like to have parents who do not speak English and do not feel comfortable with others who do not share their culture and language. As an adult I can now appreciate the social anxieties my parents faced living in a foreign country. Having been a child stuck between two cultures, I can understand the frustration and sadness of N, who is not allowed to do things that teenagers like her are allowed to do in the US. ... I can counsel her and help her understand where her mother is coming from." (Latin American mentor)

Bernadette Ludwig bludwig@gc.cuny.edu is the co-founder and a board member of Culture Connect, Inc. www.cultureconnectinc.org and a PhD Candidate in Sociology at The Graduate Center, The City University of New York.