Shouldering a language burden;

In immigrant families, children's roles as interpreters full of pressure, peril. A language burden on backs of children

The Philadelphia Inquirer

MARCH 9, 2003 Sunday CITY-D EDITION

The Philadelphia Inquirer
Found on Philly.com

Section: LOCAL; Pg. A01

Length: 1295 words

Byline: Thomas GinsbergINQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Body

Rajbir Singh has a special place in his heart for his brother's kidneys.

Four years ago, Rajbir, then 13, found himself at a Philadelphia emergency room surrounded by terrified relatives and grave doctors, all looking at him expectantly.

His 10-year-old brother had been rushed there with abdominal pain. None of the doctors spoke Punjabi, and none of the relatives spoke English. None, except for this lanky, Indian, Sikh teenager.

"That was the worst time," Rajbir recalls about his years as ***family interpreter***. "I didn't know some of the words in Punjabi. He had a disorder that I just didn't know how to translate."

Both boys survived, with different scars. Today, Rajbir is one of countless ***immigrant children*** who were pressed into service for relatives and friends as ***interpreters*** and translators.

Their linguistic labor, performed innumerable times, in surprising situations, in dozens of ***languages***, is a double-edged rite of passage that can save lives but cheat childhoods.

As old as immigration itself, interpreting by ***children*** can help parents survive but subvert ***family roles*** with ulcer-causing ***pressure***. It can edify ***children*** but stall adults from learning English. It can relieve community services but exacerbate all kinds of ills, from truancy to medical errors.

Often, as soon as they can read or speak English, these ***children*** answer the phone and open the mail. They translate the notes and reprimands from teachers. They learn adult medical details that would make other ***children*** cringe. They fill out applications for financial aid on which the whole ***family's*** food and shelter may hinge. Some relish the honor; others scorn it. But most got the job just because they were the first to pick up some English, not because they mastered the ***language*** or the subjects.

Increasingly, schools, health centers, courts, and other government-funded agencies required by law to provide translation must choose between letting ***children*** do the job or hiring ***interpreters***. Telephone-based interpreting

services have helped lower costs. But some schools still dub the translation workload their "bankruptcy issue." And when they don't provide interpreting, the ***burden*** often gets shoved onto another entity - or back to the ***children***.

"I know students who were struggling in school - who missed school - because they had to go to the doctor with their parents [to interpret]," said Carmen Sol Cotto, academic coach in the Philadelphia School District'***s*** Office of ***Language*** Equity Issues.

"We struggle with that all the time. . . . It'***s*** part of the reality of being a ***language*** minority in this country."

For Rajbir, interpreting is just another thing he does for his parents and even their friends.

"It doesn't bother me," Rajbir said. He paused and noted that some ***children*** refuse the task. "Well, sometimes it does bother me."

*

Griseld Xhuxha began interpreting two months after coming to Philadelphia from Albania in 1998 and just weeks after enrolling in school - in second grade. He was 7.

"All I knew was 'yes,' 'no' and 'OK,' " said Griseld, now 12 and an advanced student at Masterman High School. "But I picked it up pretty fast."

His parents, Salvador and Qeriba, each with advanced degrees from Albania, struggled to find work. They went to a Pennsylvania welfare office and, with Griseld'***s*** help, answered questions to get aid.

A year later, the aid suddenly stopped: The boy had mistranslated his father'***s*** work history. Community Legal Services of Philadelphia interceded, got aid restored, and cited Griseld in a lawsuit forcing the state Department of Public Welfare to improve its ***language*** access.

Now, Pennsylvania welfare offices post signs in a dozen ***languages***, and caseworkers can dial up ***interpreters*** if needed.

"We're in an ongoing process of improvement," said Fred Bostwick, a spokesman for the DPW, which could have lost federal funds if it didn't improve. "Now, we routinely involve the [telephone] ***language*** line, even if a ***child*** is there."

Griseld brushes off the episode as another day'***s*** work, saying that most places are still unable to come up with Albanian translators. "I would help them no matter what," he said. "It kind of makes me proud."

*

Raymond Buriel, a psychologist and expert in ***child*** "***language*** brokers" at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., said that researchers are probing whether the impact on ***children*** is bad, good or both.

"One hypothesis is that ***language***-brokering is detrimental because of stress," Buriel said. "The other hypothesis is that it'***s*** positive because they can help their ***families*** and learn things beyond their years."

One downside may be risk of harm in medical settings. A study published in January in the journal Pediatrics found that serious clinical errors were far more likely when "ad hoc ***interpreters***" were used, and were most likely when those ***interpreters*** were ***children***.

Some California legislators are pushing a bill that would prohibit the use of ***child*** ***interpreters*** by state-funded entities. In Pennsylvania, the Crozer-Chester Medical Center in Delaware County formally bars interpreting by minors.

But few other health centers or school districts, and no states, were willing to go so far.

"We are afraid if we don't allow it as an option, we will be establishing a barrier to treatment," said Carmen I. Paris, Philadelphia's deputy health commissioner, who oversees six public clinics. "I'd rather do [an exam] with the minor than have a woman or man go home with an untreated illness."

Even federal officials who disciplined Pennsylvania's welfare offices do not prohibit it.

"What we say is that it's your obligation to offer [interpreting] service," said an official from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Some people feel a distrust of government, so they don't feel an ***interpreter*** provided by a government agency would do a good job, and they wouldn't use the service."

*

"Sometimes," confessed Oleg Salganik, 48, a father of two from Ukraine, "it really felt like I became the ***child*** and she became the parent."

The Philadelphia taxi-driver started using his daughter when she was 16 - about a year after arriving - to translate letters, talk to doctors, everything.

Huong Nguyen, 18, a Vietnamese refugee, said that almost 10 years of interpreting for her hardworking mother reversed their ***roles*** too many times.

"***Language*** helped us drift apart," said Nguyen, of Upper Darby. "I am envious of my peers. . . . They didn't have to know all the complexities of a phone bill. . . . I want my mother to know what is really going on in my life. I want to feel I was a ***child***."

Alladira Dominquez, 30, a Mexican mother in South Philadelphia, agreed that her son, Regino, 12, has grown up fast.

"But still, it's better to use him. . . . I know he'll say the right things," she said.

Regino insisted that he is "not a grown-up." He then proceeded to explain proudly how he reviews household bills and sometimes makes payments.

"It's a way to help the grown-ups. And you can learn how to pay bills for when you get older," Regino said.

The ***role***-reversal may feed another classic ***immigrant*** condition. Parents may learn enough English for their jobs, but lean on ***children*** for everything else.

"Maybe I would've learned English faster," Regino's mother confessed. "I understand some things. But I'm not forced to learn it when he can help me."

In the end, the realities of daily life trump all. The tools of survival and love of ***family*** are one and the same.

"My parents gave up so much to come here for me," Griseld said. "This is my thing to give back."

Contact staff writer Thomas Ginsberg at 215-854-4177 or tginsberg@phillynews.com.

See INTERPRET on A11

Graphic

PHOTO AND CHART;

CHARLES FOX, Inquirer Staff Photographer

Alladira Dominquez says her son, Regino, 12, has grown up fast by helping the ***family*** with English. "But still, it'***s*** better to use him. . . . I know he'll say the right things," she said.

JOHN COSTELLO, Inquirer Staff Photographer

Griseld Xhuxha, 12, with his mother, Qeriba. Griseld began interpreting for his parents two months after the ***family*** arrived from Albania in 1998, when he was 7. "It kind of makes me proud," he said of his ***role***.

Classification

Language**:** ENGLISH

Subject: ***CHILDREN*** (90%); ***LANGUAGE*** & ***LANGUAGES*** (89%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (76%); ***LANGUAGE*** ACQUISITION (75%); LINGUISTICS (75%); PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS (71%); SIKHS & SIKHISM (71%); IMMIGRATION (69%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (69%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (69%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (69%); INSOLVENCY & BANKRUPTCY (64%); SCHOOL DISTRICTS (64%)

Organization: PHILADELPHIA SCHOOL DISTRICT (77%)

Industry: TRANSLATORS & ***INTERPRETERS*** (89%); EMERGENCY ROOMS (78%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (69%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (69%)

Load-Date: July 14, 2005