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Heritage language schools help bind the families of immigrants

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By **EVELYN SHIP**
STAFF WRITER

"You all have a lot to do this year," Carol Young said to seventh- and eighth-graders sitting in a computer room at Hackensack Middle School. "You've only learned 800 characters so far, and until you learn 1,500 you are technically illiterate."

Seventeen pairs of eyes widened.

"But Laoshi," protested one student, addressing her in Chinese. "What if we learn 1,501 characters and then forget two? Are we still illiterate?"

Young hesitated, but gave it to them straight. "Yes, that's what it means," she said firmly. "So can anybody tell me how many characters do you have to learn each day?"

Groans filled the room.

The Bergen Chinese School, which convenes for four hours every Sunday afternoon at the middle school, is a fixture in Bergen County's Taiwanese-American community, and instructors like Young have a vital mission: They must teach the second and third generations how to communicate with the first.

Entertainment COLUMNISTS



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"We want them to be in touch with their parents' original culture," principal Donna Hwang said. "We are spreading seeds."

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The Bergen Chinese School, which was founded in 1972 and has 130 students from preschool age through ninth grade, is not unique in North Jersey. Heritage language schools are active in the Japanese, Korean, Hindi and Russian communities. In Bergen County alone, 36 percent of residents speak a foreign language at home, but only 18.6 percent of their children do.

At the Bergen Chinese School, second-generation parents who, themselves, have an incomplete grasp of Chinese have begun enrolling their third-generation children. Children with parents from different foreign cultures have the mixed blessing and burden of having access to two cultural identities in addition to their American one.

Naomi Akiyama, for one, wears a backpack seven days a week. Not only does she go to the Bergen Chinese School on Sunday afternoons, she also attends the Hoshuko Japanese Weekend School, which meets at Paramus Catholic High School on Saturdays.

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It's tough being a 5-year-old with a Taiwanese mother and a Japanese father, but she manages to have fun with friends at her three different schools, said Chao Pei Ting, her mother. The little girl goes by Naomi Akiyama in kindergarten in Paramus, Akiyama Naomi at Hoshuko, and Qiushan Zhimei (her Japanese name with Chinese pronunciation) at the Bergen Chinese School.

Ting and her husband, Minoru Akiyama, decided to raise trilingual children when Naomi was a toddler. Their younger daughter, Haruna, now 3½, grew up in a multilingual environment.

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"You can't get away from English here," Akiyama said. His children, he said, "had to learn that first because they're growing up here, and they're going to be a part of this society. But we started to be concerned when English became the only common language in our family."

In the beginning, the parents worked together to introduce fun nouns -- like tyanpon, a Japanese noodle dish -- in different languages, limit television to anime, and speak Chinese for a half-hour each day. The children caught up much more quickly than they imagined. Now, he speaks entirely in Japanese with his daughters, while his wife speaks to them in Chinese.

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"They really aren't confused at all," said Ting. "We were worried at first, when we were making the transition, but they don't get mixed up."

Few public schools teach non-European foreign languages, particularly early in a child's education, when a child is primed to learn languages. And a bilingual education, which involves immersion in English and a second language, is a difficult sell when different ethnic groups share the same school.

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A pioneering English-Korean bilingual instruction program that was scheduled to begin this fall in Fort Lee public schools was canceled at the last minute because of lackluster registration on the non-Korean end. A few school districts have successfully implemented bilingual English-Spanish programs, but no other languages have taken hold.

The Bergen Chinese School focuses on building basic language skills in its preschool and kindergarten classes -- and teaches in spoken Chinese from the



start. Children must be taught pronunciation before they can start learning the notoriously challenging characters. But for third-generation children, or children of mixed heritage, wrapping their tongues around Chinese phonemes can be as hard as learning an entirely new language. The four tones of the Chinese language add to the difficulty early in the game. Teachers use laborious physical techniques: over-enunciating, breaking down each syllable to its basic mouth positions, and even coaching individual children word by word.

Parents learn, too

Before students reach the second-grade level, parents sit behind them. When a child is shy or reluctant to speak in a language he or she doesn't speak at school or see on television, teachers sometimes rely on Mom and Dad for pep talks and English translations. Parents also learn how to continue the language training into the week so that lessons take hold.

"Many of our parents are learning or re-learning the 'buh puh muh' along with their kids," she said, referring to the alphabetic system used to spell Mandarin words in Taiwan.

Akiyama agreed, joking that sitting in on Naomi's classes probably made him more conversant in "buh puh muh" than his daughter. For him, it was a way of learning more of his wife's language, although he said he still has a long way to go.

The work is hard and slow for both parents and children, but year after year, registration stays stable. Part of the reason, Hwang said, is the growing popularity of Chinese as a foreign language. Teachers from the Bergen Chinese School have attended seminars on teaching SAT II Chinese and Advanced Placement Chinese, resulting in an AP Chinese program at the top level at the school.

At the same time, preserving culture seems to be the more immediate goal. The Bergen Chinese School has no relations with the Huaxia Chinese School's Bergen branch, which, like the Japanese school, meets at Paramus Catholic, because the latter caters to parents from the People's Republic of China. The simplified Chinese characters used in China are becoming more and more standard in American universities, but students at the Bergen Chinese School still learn the traditional, more complex characters now used only in Taiwan and Hong Kong -- and, at lower levels, the "buh puh muh."

Schools' social links

The insistence on cultural preservation is not unique to the Bergen Chinese School, which also runs extracurricular classes in dancing, calligraphy and the Chinese yo-yo. Heritage language schools in North Jersey and across the nation often are associated with specific communities: the Hindi school in Kearny, for example, is based in a Hindu community center with a temple, and a Korean school in Old Tappan is anchored in a Korean church congregation. The Hoshuko Japanese Weekend School, funded in part by the Japanese government, caters to the children of expatriate businesspeople.

Differences in community allegiance may seem like fine distinctions, but they are the *raison d'être* for institutions like the Bergen Chinese School. Encouraged by their children's progress, parents like Ting and Young become teachers themselves, giving their own time back to the community. And in the end, said Hwang, language is useless without a social context. For example, Bergen Chinese School teaches the college preparation Chinese courses along with

mandatory cultural background lessons.

After all, language is only one thing that parents and children can have in common.

"We don't all speak the same language," said Akiyama, who uses English with his wife, "but we share values, and we share our laughter. We're close."

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