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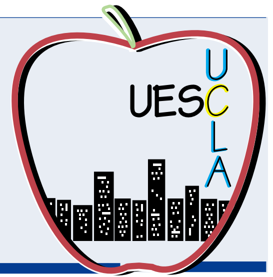

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Bridging Cultures Between Home and School: The Parent-Teacher Conference

by Blanca Quiroz, Patricia Greenfield & Marie Altchech

Miscommunication between teachers and parents can have negative effects on children's learning, but adapting practices to bridge cultural norms can help teachers, schools and parents work together to improve children's educational experiences.

One of the greatest challenges teachers face in educating students from diverse cultures is communicating effectively with their families. Miscommunication between teachers and parents or caregivers is especially troubling because it can result in families feeling cut off from their children's school. What can teachers do to alleviate some of the problems they face in communicating with parents whose backgrounds are different from their own?

One solution comes from Bridging Cultures, a collaborative workshop series concerned with cultural values and education. We focus here on the nature of cross-cultural miscommunication between Latino immigrant families and their children's teachers, and the experiences of a Bridging Cultures participant as she searched for ways to improve communication with parents.

The Parent-Teacher Conference

Two examples from our own experiences illustrate common miscommunications between teachers and parents. The first author, a Latina immigrant mother, remembers a parent-teacher conference with her daughter's first-grade teacher:

I couldn't understand what the teacher was trying to communicate when she commented on my daughter's performance. I particularly recall two confusing comments that this teacher made: "Your daughter is very sociable," and "Your daughter is outstanding in ..." My tendency as a Mexican mother was to feel very happy she was sociable; after all, that was what I was fostering. However, I did not know what to do about her being "outstanding;" I had tried to teach my daughter not to "show off," but it seemed that it was not working.

By using the term "outstanding," the teacher meant to convey the child's academic accomplishments, but what she did not realize was that she was reporting behavior the parent did not condone. In fact, an analysis of this and other parent-teacher conferences suggests that the issue of "standing out" has great potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding between teachers and Latino immigrant parents.

The third author, a teacher, was in conference with a father who was a Salvadoran immigrant. The teacher began by enthusiastically telling the father his daughter was "doing beautifully in English and in reading, writing, and speaking."

The father responded to these comments with great discomfort, looking down at his lap. He then pointed out the academic achieve-

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A Message From the Director

California's student population has changed dramatically in the last decade. In 1987-'88 the state's public-school population was 50% white and 50% nonwhite. In 1997-'98 the nonwhite student population grew to 61%, with the Latino student population increasing at a particularly rapid rate—from 30% of all California students in 1988 to 41% in 1998. Teachers now have an extraordinarily diverse group of students to educate. This diversity brings tremendous opportunities, but also new challenges.

Ethnic and cultural diversity in classrooms gives students an opportunity to learn about different cultures—not from reading a textbook, but by listening to and interacting with their classmates. Out of this can come greater acceptance and appreciation of individuals with different cultural backgrounds.

Language differences and differences between teachers' and families' cultural values and practices create challenges. Communication can be difficult, sometimes as a consequence of a single word being perceived differently by the two parties. In many cases the assumptions and values implicit in various practices result in serious conflicts between home and school—conflicts that can undermine parents' productive involvement in their children's education.

Two of the articles in this issue focus on potential areas of conflict between middle-class teachers (including Latino teachers) and new immigrant Latino families' values and cultural practices. The third discusses strategies for making student collaboration work effectively. In the years since school desegregation was implemented, group work has been promoted as a way to develop harmony and respect among children of different cultures. Research has shown that it also can contribute substantially to student learning. Whatever our goal in using collaborative groups, our chances of success vary according to *how* group work is implemented.

With this issue we present research on educational practice to inform you about practices and strategies that have the most promise for bridging cultural gaps. We hope it will help you to make the most of the important resources and experiences that all children bring to school.

— *Deborah Stipek*

Statistics are from the California State Department of Education and are available on their web site, www.cde.ca.gov/ftpbranch/sbsdiv/demographics/reports.

Browse CONNECTIONS on the UESC website, where you can also find a link to the Seeds UES home page:

www/.gseis.ucla.edu/research/uesc.html

Preparing Students for Collaborative Work

by Noreen Webb, with Laura Weishaupt

Careful preparation is necessary to help children benefit from working in groups.

Students in a sixth-grade classroom are working together on mathematics. The noise level in the room is high. One group—Miguel, Sam, Linda and Maria—is trying to estimate the total cost of a meal chosen from a restaurant menu. As Sam tries to calculate the sales tax, Miguel tells him, "Hurry up. You're taking too long."

"But I don't understand," says Sam.

"If you two can't get it," says Linda, "Why don't you just let me do it?"

Meanwhile, Maria works on the problem on her own and doesn't participate in the discussion.

Scenes such as this often play out in classrooms where children are asked to work in groups. They demonstrate that the potential of collaborative learning is not always achieved. The kinds of difficulties portrayed here, however, can be minimized by preparing children to work cooperatively.

Research has shown that small-group work has many benefits for students, including increased achievement, improved social skills and, perhaps most important, more active participation in learning. These benefits are why cooperative learning and peer or cross-age tutoring are key instructional strategies recommended in a variety of state education frameworks and in reports such as *Caught in the Middle*. But students do not instinctively know how to work successfully in groups and teachers often underestimate the time it takes to prepare them to do so. By laying the proper groundwork, teachers can help students to help each other become effective listeners and learners.

The Process

Preparation for group work involves a process of instruction and skill development that takes time. It requires an ongoing classroom tradition of safety, where the expression of ideas is encouraged and where put-downs are not tolerated. Building such a classroom climate requires daily work on the part of students and the teacher.

In addition, teachers must remember that simply putting students in small groups does not guarantee that they will interact with each other in ways that are beneficial to learning. Structuring problems for group work so that all students are held accountable and teaching specific communication skills are two means of helping students to collaborate effectively.

The following program for preparing students for group work is based on years of research showing which kinds of helping behaviors in small groups are effective for learning and which are not; the components have been tested among students in urban, predominantly minority (Latino and African-American) schools.

Thorough preparation for working in groups can take as long as one-half a period each day for three weeks. To many teachers this time will seem long, perhaps too long. Those who already use groups effectively will know it is necessary. Taking the time early in the year to train students in the dynamics of working as a team can save a great deal of time in the long run and substantially increase the value of instructional time children spend working in groups.

Class Building

In large, urban schools with diverse student populations it is all too common for students to not know their classmates well. But to work effectively together and to feel that they are part of the group, students need to interact with all the other students in their class. There are many "ice-breaker" games that can help students get to know each other quickly and without fear of rejection. For example, on several consecutive days students can be given playing cards as they enter the classroom and then be asked to find and sit with the three other people with the same number on their card. Or each student can interview another and introduce this partner to the larger group. Whatever activity is used, students should be given opportunities to get to know one person better and to interact briefly with nearly everyone in the class.

Learning How to Work With Others

Once students are acquainted with one another they are ready to begin learning basic communication skills. Identifying and discussing different situations in which it is necessary to work (1) cooperatively,

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Portions of this article originally appeared in the January 1994 issue of Middle School Journal and the May 1994 issue of Arithmetic Teacher, copyrights 1994. Excerpts are used with permission of the National Middle School Association and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Collaborative Work

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(2) independently, and (3) competitively helps students to understand and sort out the differences among these behaviors. For example, baseball teams compete against one another; violin virtuosos practice their craft independently; and employees of computer companies must cooperate to produce a successful product.

Safe Classrooms. Every classroom should be a "safety zone" for asking questions and expressing opinions. Lessons cannot be effective and students cannot share equally in opportunities for learning if they are afraid to speak because they are worried someone will "put them down." When teachers identify put-downs and note that they are detrimental to students' learning and to their self-esteem, and when they make it clear that put-downs will not be tolerated, students feel more comfortable sharing in class as well as in groups.

Classroom and Group Norms. Creating and maintaining a safe classroom is an important first step, but more is needed to prepare students to work effectively in groups. Below are other essential classroom and group norms. Students are often able to generate most of this list in classroom discussions on what is necessary to maintain a classroom conducive to learning and to make sure the experience is productive for all participants. The discussion process can give students a sense of ownership and foster commitment to the norms.

- **A signal**. Because more than one student will be talking at a time, teachers need some kind of signal to get students' attention. Some teachers ring a bell, others turn the light on and off, still others put their hand in the air and say, "Signal's on." Students need to practice responding to the signal.
- **Attentive listening**. Attentive listening—i.e., showing with your eyes and body that you are listening to the speaker—is essential to group work.
- **12" voices**. This norm identifies the need to use softer voices when working in small groups, voices that can be heard approximately 12 inches away, not all the way across the room.
- **Equal participation**. All group members are expected to contribute equally, to be active and involved so that no one person does most of the work and no one is left out.
- **"All hands up."** This norm further reinforces the notion that students need to use one another as resources. If there is a question that the group cannot answer, students should know that the teacher will work with them only after all group members have checked with one another and no one can answer. All students in the group, therefore, need to raise their hands.

Team Building. After ground rules have been set, students are randomly (or teacher) assigned to teams of no more than four students. Teambuilding activities, such as determining a group name and making a sign to display the name, help to further reinforce the group's identity. The teacher can then use the group's name instead of students' names when calling on them. It is important that recognition goes to the whole group, not individual members of the team.

Individual Accountability. To avoid the kind of situation described at the beginning of this article, teachers need to structure tasks in ways that require individual accountability. One strategy is to have each child in a group responsible for one aspect of a task. This strategy, however, should be used carefully. One or two children can end up doing all of the jobs without this being made obvious to the teacher. Also, some jobs usually require greater understanding or involve more learning than others. Thus children's educational experience can vary as a function of which jobs they are assigned. Rotating jobs so that students learn all aspects of a task is one possible solution to the problem of unequal learning arising out of division of labor.

Another strategy is to create situations in which every child in a group is invested in every member participating and having full understanding of both the process and outcome of the activity. One teacher who participated in a study of mathematics instruction typically had a member of each group of four students explain to the class the group's strategy for solving a math problem all groups had worked on. The teacher and classmates asked the presenting student questions that required real understanding, e.g., "How is your strategy different from the previous group's strategy?" Groups did not know ahead of time who would be asked to present. Indeed, the teacher drew names from a fish bowl to ensure equal participation by all students over time. By using this strategy, the teacher created a situation in which children were all motivated to make sure that they, and everyone else in their group, were actively involved.

Small-group social skills. Skills such as articulating ideas, getting the group back on task, checking teammates' understanding of the work, and encouraging others to talk are critical to productive group work. Teachers need to identify which skills are most lacking in their students and begin working on the

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skills one at a time. For example, if students are not checking teammates' understanding, the teacher might ask the students to tell what an observer would see ("looks like") and hear ("sounds like") if students *were* checking for understanding. When asked what it would "look like," students might respond with answers such as, "Someone asking a question," or "Pointing to a step in the problem." For "sounds like" students might say, "Tell me again why these two characters have the same traits," or "Explain why people in Ancient Egypt buried their rulers in pyramids." These responses can be charted and posted on the classroom walls as examples of what students should be saying and doing when demonstrating group-work skills.

Developing Helping Skills

Helping is central to effective group work, but giving help and receiving it are not as simple as they might seem. When students choose someone to help, they must learn to ask clear questions and keep asking until they understand. If they are giving help, they need to be a good listener, to give explanations instead of answers, to check for understanding, and to give praise. Giving and receiving explanations instead of answers have been shown in research to be beneficial for learning and may have positive motivational effects as well.

How the help is given may vary somewhat in different subject areas. For example, in math there often is a correct answer. It is essential that students giving help learn not to give "terminal help" (i.e., just the answer). They must learn to give explanations, to watch how teammates solve problems, and to give specific feedback.

In language arts, students may revise or edit their writing and then share their work with one another for corrective feedback. Students need to be able to identify a potential help-giver and then ask clear and direct questions about their writing. The person helping needs to respond to the request, to listen to the kind of help requested, and, again, to give explanations rather than answers.

Benefits for Students

In a study of small-group work in middle school mathematics, the methods of preparation for group work outlined here had positive effects on student behavior in small-group problem solving, on regard for classmates, and on mathematics achievement (See Farivar, 1991, 1992; Webb, 1992; Webb & Farivar, 1993; listed in *For Further Information*). The effects were especially pronounced for Latino and African-American students. Furthermore, the more stages of preparation for group work that the students had used, the greater were the positive effects on achievement and regard for classmates.

Perhaps most important, the activities described here can help students take responsibility for their own behavior and their own learning. By cooperating with others to solve problems and create projects, students learn how to communicate their ideas, share intellectual resources, and develop greater understanding of the course material. These are skills that can benefit students throughout their school years and their lives.

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Noreen Webb is a professor in the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.

A Helping Handbook

This article is based on activities and research described in **The Helping Behaviors Activities Handbook**, a guide to help teachers prepare students for cooperative learning. Compiled by Sydney Farivar and Noreen Webb, the handbook was developed in the course of a research project funded by the National Science Foundation to investigate cooperative small-group problem-solving in middle school mathematics. The activities in the handbook were designed for use in both middle and elementary schools. For more information, contact Noreen Webb, UCLA Department of Education, (310) 825-1897, or e-mail: webb@ucla.edu.

Living Across Borders

by Marjorie Faulstich Orellana

If we take the time to listen, we can help students connect their life experiences to more "academic" skills.

Eva (a pseudonym, as are all names used here) is a 7-year-old girl who was born in Los Angeles. Last year, she lived with her mother, father, and two younger brothers in an "efficiency" apartment (a single room plus a kitchen and a bathroom) in an old building with peeling paint. Eva was recently diagnosed with lead poisoning. When an uncle arrived from Guatemala, the family moved into a one-bedroom apartment down the hall. They found themselves in debt, however, and decided to take in two boarders and sublet the bedroom. They partitioned the living room into two spaces: one for the uncle, and one for the three children and their parents. When the two boarders began to tease Eva and her brothers, their mother gave the children strict instructions to stay in the living room, and to "hurry" when they had to walk past the bedroom to go to the bathroom. When the boarders ran up a huge phone bill and refused to pay, Eva's mother insisted they leave. Eva's mother is now looking for work, but the only position she can find is as a live-in domestic. She is considering sending her children to live in Mexico with her sister so that she can take one of these jobs.

Guayo is a 12-year-old boy who was born in Los Angeles. Guayo went to kindergarten here, but then went to live with relatives in different places (South Carolina, Washington, Illinois, Utah, and Guatemala) as his parents looked for work. Guayo has since returned to Los Angeles. He lives with his parents, infant sister, and two elementary-school-aged brothers in a one-bedroom motel room near downtown. His parents serve as managers for the hotel; guests ring at their door at all times of day and night to pay for their lodging. His parents also work two outside jobs. Despite their busy lives, they manage to facilitate Guayo's involvement in sports activities in the larger L.A. area. **Figure 1** shows a recreation of what Guayo drew when we asked him to make a "map" of places in his life.

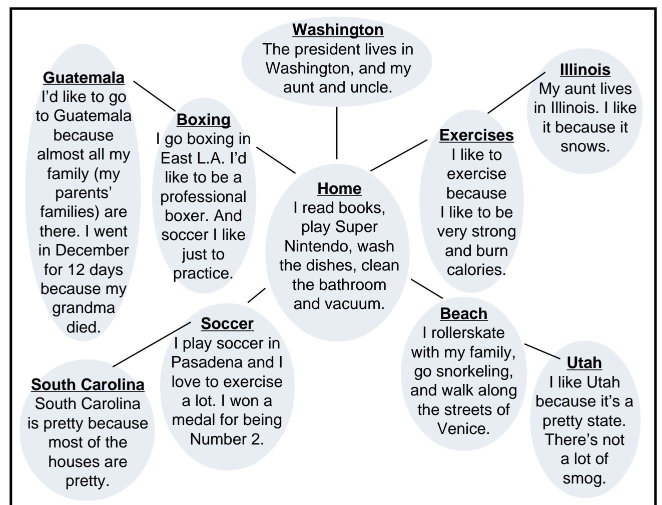

Figure 1: A recreation of Guayo's map

From the perspective of mainstream, middle-class America, these children's lives may seem extraordinary. But in the central Los Angeles community where I worked for a decade as a classroom teacher and where I have conducted ethnographic research for the last three years, stories like these were common. Virtually all families spanned international as well as national borders. Many children had also moved back and forth between national borders. Household constellations changed frequently as families with limited economic resources struggled to survive and to seek opportunities to improve their children's futures. Consider the following:

- More than half the students in one first-grade classroom had a sibling living in their country of origin. Siblings sometimes moved in and out of the child's household, in part because parents believed that at certain ages (especially adolescence) the children were safer in their country of origin.
- Three quarters of the children in this classroom lived in households that included non-nuclear family members.
- More than half the students had a change in their household composition during a given year. Three and four times in a year was not uncommon.
- In the past three years, families who left this community moved to 29 different states as well as to other parts of California and Canada. At least 85 families returned to their countries of origin. (School records indicate 240 families moved to "unknown" destinations; many of these families may have left the country.)

As a teacher, I know how difficult it can be to grasp, and work with, the complexities of these kinds of changing residence and household dynamics. I used to be confused by children's answers to what I thought were simple questions, such as "Who is in your family?" (Individual children's answers often varied over time.) But family can mean many

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things—whether nuclear or extended, those living under one roof, or those living far apart but connected by love and heritage. It can mean different things to the same children at different times depending on how connected they are to distant siblings (did they talk by phone last weekend or have they had no contact for years?), or on changes happening at home, such as relatives and even the primary caregiver changing from time to time. By asking more specific questions—such as: "Who lives in your apartment?" "Who is home when you get there after school?" and "Who do you know that lives in El Salvador?"—I learned more about my students' lives than when I asked generic questions about "family."

As a teacher, I also know how frustrating it can be when our students move from school to school, or when they travel to their home countries during school sessions. Like other teachers, I used to wonder at the timing of many families' "vacations." But I talked with dozens of parents during the course of my research, and I saw how complicated a trip home was. In this year-round school community, children in the same household were often on different vacation schedules; to travel together meant taking one or more children out of school. School vacations also were not always scheduled around the best times to travel (for special holidays that are celebrated back home, like town feast days or Holy Week; or for family events.) But mostly, families that span national borders traveled to fulfill family obligations that do not respect school schedules. Camilo, for example, went to El Salvador three times during his kindergarten year so that his mother could deal with the consequences of three family tragedies—an uncle shot by robbers in their Los Angeles apartment; the unexpected death of an aunt in El Salvador; and the death of Camilo's grandmother following a prolonged illness. For each death, Camilo's mother was obliged to take care of funeral arrangements and many other complicated family matters, and Camilo was dependent on care from his mother. As a consequence, Camilo attended school on only 77 of 163 days.

Life Lessons—Experiences That Enhance Academics

Certainly, frequent moves and missed school are disruptive to children's academic progress. But kids also learn many things from their experiences of living and traveling in different places. If we take the time to listen to our students, and learn about their lives, we can help them connect this knowledge to more "academic" skills. We can use their experiences as examples in social studies and science lessons, for word problems in math, and for conversations about literature. We can pool the collective knowledge that children in our classrooms have about geography, for example, and engage in lively social analyses about life in different places. (Such analyses are implicit in the words Guayo wrote on his map, but Guayo told me that he had never had the opportunity to talk about his travels in school.)

We can also give assignments that allow space for children to display such knowledge (and simultaneously, for us to learn about our students), including maps, graphs, charts, and diagrams that depict people, places, and activities that are important in their lives and that contrast life in different places; timelines for their travels; vacation journals; and interviews with people who live in different places. The important thing in designing such activities is to make them flexible enough to accommodate all children's experiences—leaving space for children to find their own points of connection—and to be careful about the assumptions that we might make about what is "normal" or "right."

Many children in Los Angeles live in households that are in constant flux. They are adapting as best they can to the changing world around them and many are thriving despite the obstacles they face. (Camilo, for example, was considered a model student by his first- and second-grade teachers; and Guayo is taking honors courses in middle school and has run in two L.A. Marathons.) If we are to help our students reach their full potential, the onus is on us to adapt as best *we* can to meet their needs. We can do this by questioning our own assumptions and talking with our students to learn about their lives; by modifying our curriculum to build on our students' experiences; and by changing our organizational practices to accommodate different family arrangements. For example, rather than saying to our students, "Give this note to your mother," (if Mom is in El Salvador, the child may shove the note in the bottom of her backpack) we need to find out who the child's primary caretaker is, and how we can best deliver information to that person. We may even need to think about delivering important information across national borders.

Transnational families find creative means to maintain communication across international borders under changing circumstances; as teachers, we might learn to do so as well.

Marjorie Faulstich Orellana is an assistant professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. She was a bilingual classroom teacher in Los Angeles from 1984 to 1993.

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ments of his son, whom he had also brought to the conference. The teacher, however, was uncomfortable with this new topic, as revealed in her altered tone of voice. She relaxed only when she had succeeded in bringing the conversation back to the daughter, who was the topic of the conference. However the father then was passive for the rest of the conference.

In this case, the father attempted to reframe the conference in a manner that better fit with his cultural perspective: that each child should be valued and neither singled out. The teacher, in her effort to maintain the focus on her pupil, distanced the father and lost the opportunity to communicate with her student's family.

These two accounts illustrate how different cultural perspectives can cause problems in teacher-parent communication and relationships. The teachers here expressed an individualistic perspective: they assumed that the parents' goals, like their own, were for their children to become outstanding, intellectually competent individuals. The parents demonstrated a more collectivistic view: In the first example, the mother interpreted "outstanding" as "standing out," something that is to be avoided in her culture. And by equating his daughter's skills with those of her younger brother, the father illustrated the value he places on each child as a contributing member of the family group, with neither singled out at the cost of the other.

Each cultural model consists of a set of assumptions that are usually taken for granted and therefore often not recognized as culturally based. Each model also defines a set of ideals, a set of criteria for socializing and evaluating children. These ideals may come into conflict when the children of Latino immigrants have teachers who come from different cultural backgrounds or who are not sensitive to cultural differences and the potential misunderstandings or conflicts in values that can result.

Teacher-parent cultural conflict does not occur with every Latino parent or every teacher. Latinos as an ethnic group are extremely diverse—in education, social class, rural or urban origin, country of origin, acculturation, race, etc. Moreover, the same kinds of conflicts that we describe above can occur whenever there are cultural differences between teachers and parents, whether the differences are related to social class or ethnicity. Teachers therefore need to explore and become informed about the cultural values systems of *their* students' families, not *assume* them on the basis of ethnicity. Nonetheless, our research and that of others indicates that the historical, economic, and cultural conditions experienced by many recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America suggest a pattern of adaptation and cultural values similar to the one described here.

We have found in our work, as others have found, that Latino immigrant families are very interested in their children's education. However, parents with little education who immigrate from Latin countries do not always realize that their values are not the same as the new culture they are joining, and that their values may be compromised in pursuit of educational achievement in the U.S. Understanding culturally-based differences in perspectives can help teachers communicate and collaborate with Latino parents to support children's learning. In some instances, a good understanding of students' culture helps schools adjust their own priorities.

Learn More About Bridging Cultures

The Bridging Cultures Project has produced **Bridging Cultures Between Home and School: A Guide** (Trumbull et al., 1997), for preservice and in-service teachers, and **Bridging Cultures in the Classroom: A Module for Pre-Service Teachers** (Rothstein-Fisch et al., 1997). Copies of these publications are available from WestEd, 730 Harrison Street, San Francisco, CA 94107; fax (415) 565-3012; phone (415) 565-3000.

The Bridging Cultures Project: A Teacher Responds

The teacher who participated in the second parent-teacher conference described above became a member of the Bridging Cultures project when it began in Fall, 1996. Bridging Cultures is an ongoing cross-cultural professional development effort that has allowed a group of California teachers and researchers to work collaboratively to apply research on cross-cultural value conflict in schools to the education of children from Latino immigrant families.

This teacher had an opportunity to respond to our analysis of her parent-teacher conferences during one of our Bridging Cultures workshops. Excerpts from the journal she kept point out the conflict she perceived between promoting students' academic success and recognizing their families' collectivistic values. She was

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particularly concerned with ways to communicate student progress to parents and the constraints of the parent-teacher conference structure.

My awareness of the cultural differences between collectivistic and individualistic groups has been heightened throughout the context of "Bridging Cultures" meetings. …Now I realize not only that there are differences, but I also greatly appreciate the concept that a bridge must be constructed so as not to value one over the other.

However, this leads to a conflict. What should be the ultimate goal of a teacher? Should it be facilitating the academic success of my students? Or should it be to facilitate the collectivistic mode valued by the Hispanic families I work with? Maybe it could be a combination of both goals?...

When I reflect upon the parent conference situation, which is soon upon me again, I feel the situation is not easily resolved. First, I have a time constraint of fifteen minutes in a room where other families are waiting. Second, I am responsible for the academic-social progress of each child. I show parents how well their children are doing or where improvement is necessary.

Group Conferencing

In the course of Bridging Cultures workshops, teachers proposed and experimented with alternative practices for conducting parent-teacher conferences. The teacher above resolved what she had earlier perceived as a dilemma by developing a new group format for her conferences. This format, as she describes in the excerpt below, was in keeping with the collectivistic view held by many of the parents of her students. A more social atmosphere put parents at ease and the group context was more efficient for the teacher. As an added benefit, the students in the class became active participants, sharing their progress with their parents. The teacher wrote in her journal:

In the prescribed practice of parent conferencing, teachers allot ten to fifteen minutes of conference time for each parent. This time is used to review a child's academic progress, report cards, social skills and recent state test scores. Most of the time, other parents are waiting for their time, or several parents arrive at the same time. In many circumstances the agreed-upon time is not when the parents show up. Teachers repeat generic information at each conference. This type of conferencing tends to be threatening for most parents.

To incorporate the concept of collectivism, the cultural orientation in many Hispanic families, I redesigned my parent conferencing this year. I scheduled three group conferences on our Pupil Free Day. For families that couldn't attend due to work or other conflicts, I arranged a separate time. I divided my children into three groups according to language and achievement level so as to facilitate a group conference. I had one English-speaking group and two Spanish-speaking groups. I arranged the Spanish-language groups when my paraprofessional could attend and assist in translation.

Most of the parents arrived on time and sat with me in a circle with their children. The children presented their parents, mostly mothers, with a folder that contained test scores, report cards, a parent tips list and a booklet that helps interpret test scores (which is very hard to understand). I generally explained the percentiles and stanines of the Stanford 9 or Aprenda and how the parents can use the results to know which academic areas are strong and which need improvement. I explained the report card format and meaning of the marks and discussed what my expectations are for the next quarter. I also discussed what I can do to help students improve and progress academically as well as how the parents can help at home.

A friendly, comfortable, and warm feeling came across during the conferencing. Many parents had questions that benefited the other parents. Parents conferencing together lent a source of mutual support, like family members all supporting each other. This familial atmosphere is aligned with a collectivistic model. The children, once the group session was over, excitedly escorted their parents and siblings to their desks to share and discuss their portfolios. The children were glad to be involved in the conferencing process. The children also took the parents on a tour of the room to show their displayed work...

I found the group conferencing to be relaxing for the parents. It was a less threatening environment than the individual conferencing style …This format…represented a shift in the balance of power. After the conferencing time, about one hour, parents could sign up for a private conference or ask me a few questions privately.

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In addition to the benefits listed above, the teacher reports that she was able to see all 28 parents in three days—only six did not attend the group conference. Parents and children seemed satisfied with the new approach and the school principal was so impressed with the conference design she asked the teacher to lead a staff development on group conferencing.

Other suggestions for additional collectivistic adaptations that could strengthen the bridge between home and school include, for example:

- Acknowledging children who use their academic skills to help other siblings at home (e.g., by reading to a younger child);
- Telling parents when their child is particularly helpful to the teacher or to other classmates.

In addition, the principles contained in the group conference can be applied to other forms of home-school contact; for example, this teacher had already had great success with holding classroom potluck dinners for children and their families.

Reflecting on the Process

From the parents' collectivistic perspective, the teacher's new conference format demonstrates that she can bring together different individuals to achieve explicit and common goals. Skill in orchestrating harmonious group interaction is more highly valued by parents with collectivistic values than is one-on-one interaction. At the same time, the teacher was also able to provide children with an active-participant role, an invaluable skill in the culture of the school.

Initially, this teacher seemed to focus on the pragmatic difficulties of integrating different values into her own visualization of what a parent-teacher conference should look like. Through the Bridging Cultures workshops and through her own experimentation, this teacher realized that her goals and the values of her students' families were not mutually exclusive. Rather, these goals and values became mutually reinforcing in her new group conferencing format. By grouping parents according to children's achievement level, she was able to present the parents with an overview of academic progress at the group level, without singling out individuals. She used a family process (parent-child communication) to present parents with their children's individual work. In addition, she provided an opportunity for parent-teacher consultation on an individual basis.

Most important, however, was the teacher's realization that including families' cultural perspectives can benefit students as well as teachers. Including the students in the conference promoted their identity as part of the class group and allowed them to reflect on their academic progress. Thus the students became part of the bridge between cultures. This change in practices did not come easily, however. To be able to truly accept that one's own perceptions are not the only ones or even the better ones requires humility and selflessness. These qualities can be threatening to people raised in a culture that places a high priority on building and protecting self esteem.

Bridging Cultures to Build Better Schools

One of the most important outcomes of the Bridging Cultures workshops was participants' recognition of the fact that their actions as educators are based on the implicit assumptions of their own cultural framework. This realization is necessary to build respect for differences and a sincere acknowledgment that there is value in diversity.

The Bridging Cultures workshops demonstrate some of the ways that collaboration among parents, teachers, and researchers can help schools to utilize the rich cultural resources that immigrant Latino children bring to school.

Resources

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Acknowledgments

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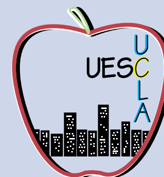

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