Dialogue across Cultures:
Teachers' Perceptions
about Communication with Diverse Families

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Introduction

It is well accepted in the field of home-school relations and child development that parents and teachers must work together to build common expectations and to support student learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1979; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994). It follows, therefore, that the teacher must establish good relations and open communication with parents.[1] Building strong, trusting, and mutually respectful relationships between parents and teachers who share similar cultural backgrounds is difficult enough. Doing so between parents and teachers who come from different backgrounds is even more difficult.

New Jersey, like many other states, is experiencing a significant influx of new immigrants—from countries such as India, Pakistan, China, Russia, Poland, Nigeria, Liberia, Mexico, Dominican Republic, and Haiti. In addition, New Jersey remains one of the most segregated states in the country, educating the majority of its African-American families in the inner city and first-ring communities that surround the cities. Our teaching profession consists primarily of European-American women who are, in Lisa Delpit's words, teaching "other people's children" and who need help in doing so (1995).

Given this diversity in New Jersey classrooms, we conceptualized a multiphase research project with the ultimate goal of helping teachers understand family values, beliefs, and practices in order to create a learning environment at school that acknowledges and builds upon these. Simultaneously, the project aims to facili-

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tate parents' understanding of the school's values, beliefs, and practices so they can create a congruent learning environment at home.

It is the first goal that this study seeks to address. We need to learn more about how teachers currently understand their students' family cultures, how they come to these understandings, and how this understanding influences how they reach out to parents. Little has been written about this "missing link" in our knowledge base related to parent involvement (Caspe, 2003, p.128).

Towards this end, we designed a survey to assess New Jersey teachers' current knowledge and practices. Therefore the following questions are addressed in the article:

1. How do teachers define parent involvement; how do they define culture?

2. What practices do teachers use in working with families in general and, more specifically, with families from cultures different from their own?

3. What is the extent and nature of awareness of teachers with respect to the cultural beliefs and practices of the families in their classrooms?

4. What aspects of culture do teachers identify as important influences on children's education?

5. In what ways do teachers currently make use of what they know about their students' cultural backgrounds when planning instruction?

The Impact of Culture on Child Development and Learning

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development (1979, 1986) and Super and Harkness's developmental niche theory

(1997) argue that a child's development is influenced not only by their parents, but by other systems as well, including the family's culture, the caregivers' "ethnotheories" related to child development, and school and community values and beliefs.

Related to this, Gutierrez and Rogoff's (2003) definition of culture as a dynamic, situational, and historic construct stresses that a person's culture is not solely influenced by their ethnicity or race, but rather by a number of additional variables as well: i.e., historical context, geographic location, gender, generation, age, religion, group memberships, and level of education. Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) argue that the way one approaches learning is influenced by the practices inherent within the individual's cultural community characterized by all of the variables mentioned above—not solely a person's ethnicity.

Even Patricia Greenfield (1994), whose theory of cultural differences based on child-rearing goals towards either independence or interdependence, warns against jumping to conclusions that a person is automatically inclined towards either one or the other solely based on their ethnicity. Therefore, this study raises questions of how to translate understandings of a child's multi-faceted culture into classroom practices that open communication with parents and engage the child in a culturally responsive way.

The Importance of Parent/School Communication

Since it is acknowledged that both parents and teachers are responsible for educating our children, it would seem that it would be in the child's best interest for us all to be working towards the same goals. This common-sense notion is also supported by research. For example, studies into the impact of facilitating ongoing

interactions with parents in order to help parents reinforce the school's goals and objectives at home (Berger, 1996; Epstein, 1990), the impact of parental interest in and encouragement of school activities on positive attitudes towards school and learning (Epstein, 2001), and finally the impact of communication and cooperation between home and school on children's learning (Epstein, 1990) all point to the critical importance of this relationship.

When dealing with parents from cultures different from their own, open lines of communication with parents are even more essential. If teachers are to create learning environments conducive to learning for children from different cultures, they need insight into the values, beliefs, and practices of those cultures (Bensman, 2000; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003).

Bensman (2000) argues that cultural interchange, the process by which teachers learn about cultures that their students bring to class and parents learn about the school/classroom culture, is the way to facilitate student success. Delpit (1995), Lee, et al. (2003), and Trumbull (2001) argue that this knowledge can then be translated into classroom activities that honor and incorporate culturally-based knowledge.

Unfortunately such open communication between parents and teachers is not common place. The dynamics of the parent-teacher relationship create communication problems that under the best of circumstances can be problematic. However, teachers and parents carry many preconceived notions about each other that make communication even more difficult.

Barriers to Good Parent/School Relations

Researchers have identified a variety of factors that inhibit open communication between parents and teachers regardless of cultural backgrounds (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Dodd & Konzal, 1999, 2001). These include different knowledge bases of teachers and parents, different perspectives in relation to "my" child versus "all children," use of jargon or "educator-speak"[2] when communicating with parents (Dodd & Konzal, 1999, 2001), lack of time for informal opportunities to get to know each other in non-stressful, non-bureaucratic encounters (Henry, 1996), and, finally, different understandings of the "proper" roles for teachers and parents (Greenwood &

Hickman, 1991; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Joshi, 2002).

Unfortunately, when parents and teachers come from different backgrounds, the barriers listed above are exacerbated and further barriers are introduced. Reviewing the literature, Bermudez and Marquez (1996) identified the following additional barriers that prevent parents and teachers from communicating openly and honestly, "…lack of English language skills, lack of understanding of the home-school partnership, lack of understanding of the school system, lack of confidence, work interference, negative past experiences with schools, and insensitivity or hostility on the part of the school personnel" (p 3). These (and other) teacher attitudes towards parents many times lead to what parents perceive as insensitivity and even hostility (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996). Many times these negative and/or stereotypical teacher attitudes towards parents derive from cultural blinders.

Trumbull, et al. (2001) argue that the major barrier to parent-school communication is the lack of understanding of the very different beliefs that parents and educators may hold in relation to the purposes, goals, and outcomes of schooling. They argue "…it, is rare that schools (or those in charge of them) get below the surface to understand how those differences can lead not only to different goals but also completely different views of schooling and, hence, parent involvement" (p. 31).

This lack of understanding of the underlying beliefs about the parents' goals for child-rearing and education may lead to an unarticulated clash with educators' values and beliefs. In such cases, parents and educators are each pulling in different directions without necessarily being aware of what is happening. The child, of course, is in the middle, receiving one set of messages at home and another set at school. Surfacing these unarticulated different belief systems is in the best interests of the children—but it is not easy.

Translating Cross-Cultural Understandings into Practice

For communication between parents and teachers to be meaningful and responsive, it is necessary to understand the cultural frameworks within which parents' function, since parental attitudes are influenced by cultural and economic factors (Greenfield, 1994; Trumbull et al, 2001). Parents foster the development of children through developmental pathways

which are couched within a given culture (Weisner, 1998). Aspects of culture like communication, education, dress, religion, and values for socialization and interactions influence an individual's behavior, values, and attitudes.

"The schools then become the agents who help children build bridges between the cultures of the family and other communities, by means of practices that respect and respond to the diversity of families" (Wright & Stegelin, 2003). In order to do this, is important for teachers to understand the cultural frameworks from which they function (Caspe, 2003).

Unfortunately, more often than not, teachers don't have deep understandings of either their own or their students' family cultural pathways and do not know how to build these bridges (e.g., see Gonzalez-Mena, 2000). There has been significant work in identifying the need for and developing strategies for culturally responsive teaching (Caspe, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1991; Marion, 1980; Trumbull, et al, 2001; Voltz, 1994). However, in the schools we visit we see little evidence that teachers are familiar with these practices.

Being able to build bridges for families and teachers so that they have insight into each other's worlds is essential for the well being of the children we hold in common. As a first step towards helping teachers understand how culture influences beliefs, values, and practices related to education and to connecting this understanding to their professional practice, we conducted a survey in order to find out (1) what teachers currently know and believe about the influence of culture on learning and (2) the practices they currently use to interact with parents and to design instructional activities for children from cultures different from their own.

Method

Participants were practicing teachers, specialists, and administrators in public and private central New Jersey schools serving children from preschool to 5th grade. One of the local elementary schools was approached and permission of the principal was obtained. The purpose of the survey was explained to the teachers and other faculty members in a faculty meeting. Subsequently, at a second faculty meeting, surveys were distributed and completed by all teachers, administrators, and other faculty members.

The total number of the respondents from this school was 25. The remaining

respondents were working in preschools that were state funded and were enrolled in a graduate class at a local college. The purpose of the research was explained. All the students agreed to participate in the research. Informed consent was received from all of the participants. The final sample consisted of 40 respondents.

A majority of the respondents were females (92%) and PK-3 classroom teachers (82%). Of the respondents who reported their teaching experience, 42% (14) had 3 years or less teaching experience, while 30% (10) had more than 14 years of teaching experience. Ninety percent of the respondents identified their ethnicity, out of which 83% (30) were European American, 11% (4) were African American, 3% (1 each) were Hispanic/Latino and Middle Eastern. In terms of the demographic composition of the children, many of the classrooms had approximately half European American, while the remaining were African American, Hispanic, or Asian.

In order to design the questionnaire for this study an extensive review of literature on parent involvement and culture was undertaken. Based on the literature, common practices of parent involvement and components of culture were identified and a draft of the questions was developed (Bennett, 2003; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997; Wright & Stegelin, 2003). The questionnaire was refined from feedback from a focus group of practicing teachers and parents who had similar demographics as the final sample. To further refine the questionnaire, it was piloted with a group of central and southern New Jersey teachers enrolled in a graduate class at a local college.

The final questionnaire was comprised of three types of questions: open ended, ranking, and Likert type rating questions. The survey had two main sections: (1) parental involvement and (2) knowledge of culture and its impact upon a child's education. The first section of the survey consisted of questions where participants were asked to define parental involvement and to address means and challenges of involving parents.

In the second section, participants were first asked to define culture and then rank the most important components of understanding culture. The components of culture consisted of six different categories: communication patterns, social values, ways of learning, child rearing, outward displays, and religious practices (See Benett, 2003; Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997; Wright & Stegelin, 2003).

Other questions asked participants to rate, on a 4-point scale, their awareness of cultural components and the components of culture that they felt most influenced a child's academic success. Open ended questions were used to seek the participants' definitions of parent involvement and culture along with their own practices regarding the same.

Likert type and ranking scales were used for all other questions. After the data were collected, the open ended questions were read by each of the researchers and emergent themes were identified. Consensus was reached amongst the researchers on the themes that emerged.

Findings about Parent Involvement

When asked to define parent involvement, the most common response was participation in school activities. Other common responses included communicating with school, demonstrating interest in school, and supporting children at home. Respondents were then asked to identify the important ways in which parents should be involved in their child(ren)'s education. The parent involvement practices most frequently rated as being important were communicating with teachers (38%), teaching children family values and beliefs (28%), and attending parent conferences/meetings (23%).

When asked to describe how parents are currently involved in their classrooms, the most common themes were participating in the classroom, attending special events and parties, chaperoning field trips, and attending parent-teacher conferences. Teachers also reported that written communication and conferences were the strategies that they most often employed in their efforts to involve parents and less frequently responded that home reading logs, telephone calls home, and class presentations were also effective strategies for including parents in their child's education.

The survey also sought to investigate the teachers' perceptions about the reasons for lack of parental involvement in their child(ren)'s education. About half of the teachers identified parents' other time commitments as being the number one reason for lack of involvement (53%). Parents' struggle to provide basic needs of the families emerged as the second reason by about one third of the respondents (35%). Other reasons for lack of parental involvement were difficulty in comprehending language (18%), educational constraints of the parents (18%), and parental difficulty in understanding the school culture (18%). An open-ended question about the challenges of involving parents revealed similar findings: parents' lack of time and language barriers. A third theme, though, also emerged: parents' lack of interest in their child's education.

Findings about Culture

The second section of the survey focused on identifying the respondents' beliefs and knowledge related to developing an understanding of cultures of families in their classrooms. Respondents were first asked to define culture. An overwhelming number of them defined culture as a set of beliefs and values. The next most frequently used definition of culture was customs and traditions, followed by religion and language.

In a second open-ended question, respondents were asked to explain whether or not they felt it was important to understand the different cultures of the families of the children in their classroom. Although all of the respondents answered in the affirmative, they gave varying reasons for doing so. The most common theme was to understand their students' backgrounds, followed by the effect it has on children's education and learning, and that it aids in communicating with parents.

With respect to how teachers acknowledge culture in their curriculum, the most common responses included reading multicultural books, celebrating holidays, implementing cultural heritage units, and inviting parents to participate in the classroom. In their interactions with families, teachers stated that they addressed culture through their own awareness of holidays and celebrations, through discussion of culture, and by translating communication into the families' preferred language.

For the purposes of this study, culture was conceptualized as having six main components: patterns of communication (body language, personal space, comfort with touching, talking and listening); social values (do's and don'ts of behavior, determination of status, and definitions of achievement); preferred ways of learning and knowledge most valued in a given culture; ideas about raising children (child rearing patterns and goals, family structure, adult-child interactions, discipline, dependence-independence orientation); outward displays of culture (celebrations, artifacts, food, art, literature, and music); and religious values practiced in any given culture.

Understanding Family Diversity

Table One reports on teacher responses to the following survey questions: To what degree are you aware of these cultural components of the families in your classroom? Which of these components of culture do you think most influence a child's academic learning/performance? On which of these areas have you sought information from parents?

David Bensman (2000) defines cultural interchange as "the process by which members of groups with different traditions, values, beliefs, and experiences gained a greater degree of mutual understanding" (p. iii). It is our contention that this "cultural interchange" is essential if teachers are to design culturally responsive instruction. In order for teachers to develop this knowledge-base and to translate it into practice, it is first important to surface their current and often unarticulated knowledge and beliefs about how cultural traditions, values, and beliefs influence learning and how teachers can take an active role in promoting open communication that leads to mutual understandings. Our findings suggest that the teachers we surveyed may have conflicting beliefs and practices in both of these areas.

Parent Involvement

The findings indicated that the common understanding of parent involvement was having the parents participate in the school. However, whether or not these practices actually lead to cultural interchange is not known.

Are teachers and parents getting to know each other during these activities in ways that lead to building trusting relationships? (Bensman, 2000; Dodd & Konzal, 2001). During these activities, are teachers communicating in ways that encourage parents to share their cultural beliefs and values? Are teachers able to observe how parents interact with their children and

other children in order to gain cultural insights (Caspe, 2003 Trumbull, et al, 2001)? This will be investigated in future research subsequent to the current study.

When asked about their most effective strategies for involving parents, teachers responded that written communication and conferences were most effective. The teachers in our study recognized what the researchers tell us about the importance of communicating with parents, but it is unclear of the actual usage of these parent/teacher conferences. Researchers tell us that two-way communication is essential for building mutual trust and respect between parents and teachers; that two-way communication invites parents to tell teachers what they know about their children, their community, and their culture (Bensman, 2000; Dodd & Konzal, 2001; Edwards, 1999; Atkin & Bastiani, 1988).

Written communication is clearly one-way communication either from the parent or the teacher. It serves to maintain the social distance of teachers from parents (Powell, 1978). Parent-teacher conferences, on the other hand, are a perfect opportunity for parents and teachers to have two-way communication. However, many times these conferences, rather than promoting cultural interchange, revert to another form of one-way communication—teachers telling parents (Lawrence-Light-foot, 2003, Trumbull, et al, 2001).

Therefore, concluding the findings about parent involvement, it is unclear whether or not the teachers use the parent/teacher conference as a means of promoting two-way communication and cultural interchange (Bensman, 2000) or use it more as a unidirectional way of passing information.

Cultural Knowledge

One of the most interesting findings is

that at times there appears to be a disparity between what teachers report about their awareness of culture, what they say about how culture influences learning, their actual practice in the classroom, and the topics about which they seek information. While we did expect some disparity between teacher beliefs and practices (Leet al, 2003; Trumbull, et al, 2001), we did find it surprising that the information that teachers seek about culture was also a part of this disparity. (See Table 1)

One possible reason for this disparity could be that teachers on a conceptual level understand the importance and influence of culture, however might be ill-equipped to translate it into actual practice. It might reflect the teachers' narrow view of culture (e.g., emphasis on overt aspects like food, celebrations, dress). They might also lack skills or training in integrating other more or less tangible aspects of culture into the curriculum and classroom practice.

Teachers overwhelmingly felt that patterns of communication, social values, preferred ways of learning and knowledge, and child raising patterns had a strong influence on students' learning. However, with respect to the outward displays of culture (dress, celebrations, food, art, literature, etc.) and religious values, less than half of the respondents felt that these had an influence on students' learning.

Yet, when asked how they acknowledge culture in their classrooms, the most common themes that emerged were books, holidays, and cultural heritage units, all of which fall under the category of outward displays of culture. Likewise, when asked how they affirm culture in their interactions with families, they reported that they demonstrate their own awareness of the culture's holidays.

Therefore, there seems to be a discrepancy between the fact that teachers feel that outward displays of culture do not have an important influence in learning and the fact that that is exactly what they choose to incorporate in their curriculum and interactions with families and what they mostly seek information about from parents.

Another interesting finding related to religious values. While 44% felt that religious values have some influence on learning, only a little over one-third of the respondents seek information on these values. It appears that teachers are uncomfortable with discussions related to religious values, especially in public school settings.

This is understandable given the confusion in schools about what is allowed and

Table 1
Dissonance between Teacher Beliefs and Practice

	High Awareness	Little Awareness	High Influence on Learning	Seeks Information About
Teacher Responses to Survey Questions _Percentages_				
Patterns of Communication	66	34	95	63
Social Values	60	40	92	54
Ways of Learning	49	51	97	57
Child Rearing Practices	43	57	79	63
Outward Displays	50	50	41	66
Religious Values	15	85	44	37

what is not allowed in relation to talking about and teaching about religion. We find it a problem since it is generally acknowledged that religious values significantly influence parents' beliefs about child rearing and education.

Limitations and Implications

This study is comprised of a small sample of preschool through third grade teachers in one state. These participants were volunteers and a sample of convenience. This leads to limitations of generalizability of the findings of the study. However, this study is a pilot for subsequent research that will be more extensive in its outreach as well as its depth. Additionally, this study was specifically implemented to provide data for the design and formulation of a in-service professional development program for schools.

This study reveals that the New Jersey teachers who responded to this survey have a rhetorical understanding of the important aspects of culture, but lack the ability to interpret that knowledge into practices. It leaves us wondering what they mean when they say that culture is the beliefs and values people hold. How do they operationalize this concept?

The same is true for their understanding of parent involvement practices. They identify communication and parent/teacher conferences as important, but we are left wondering about the specific strategies they use and if they use them for the purpose of cultural interchange. Future research will be designed to further probe these questions.

Notes

[1] We use the term parents to include all family members who act as caregivers

[2] Parent term for educational jargon from Konzal, 1996.

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