

# BRIDGING CULTURES® IN PARENT CONFERENCES: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

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In this chapter, we discuss how one of the most common forms of parent involvement in children's schooling—the parent conference—is an opportunity to examine the role of culture in home-school relationships. We draw on sociocultural theory, teacher research, and the collaborative action research of the Bridging Cultures® Project<sup>1</sup> to show how conferences between school staff and families can

<sup>1</sup>The Bridging Cultures® Project, a collaboration among four professional researchers and seven teacher-researchers, explored the applicability of cultural theory and research to the education of immigrant Latino students.

be more effective when school professionals have a deeper understanding of both the culture of school and the cultures of the families they serve.

### SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS, PARENT CONFERENCES, AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

School psychologists often meet with parents to talk about assessment results, intervention plans, intervention results, and other matters. Indeed, by federal law, school psychologists must meet with parents before formulating an Individual Education Plan (IEP; Fagan & Wise, 1994). Given the increasing diversity in the United States, a great many school psychologists are likely to find themselves working with families from communities with which they have had little experience (National Association of School Psychologists, 2004).

Students of school psychology may learn about cultural diversity in some of their courses; however, they are unlikely to get the adequate instruction, direct supervision, and field experience to support the development of cultural competence<sup>2</sup> (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002). Nor are they likely to learn about alternative problem-solving strategies in the educational setting that are based on cultural understanding (W. Laija-Rodriguez, personal communication, September 5, 2003). Thus, many school psychologists enter the field underprepared to serve the diverse families whose children attend the schools in which they practice (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002). We hope our chapter can serve as one resource to address this gap.

### THE TRADITION OF PARENT CONFERENCES

Parent conferences are a ubiquitous feature in U.S. schools (Carey, Lewis, & Farris, 1998; Raffaele & Knoff, 1999). They are widely accepted as an opportunity for parents and school personnel to exchange perceptions about students' school adjustment and performance. Although the parent conference is often used to emphasize parents' role in the development and education of their children, the ways that conferences are carried out can effectively minimize the role of minority<sup>3</sup> parents (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995). Harry et al. note, "The main vehicle for parental advocacy in special education is formal conferences held at prespecified periods. ... Yet the data [of our study] showed the inadequacy of this structure as a vehicle for communication or advocacy" (p. 370). One reason that communication and advocacy fail, we contend, is likely to be culture-based differences in assumptions about goals for children and about the roles that parents, teachers, school psychologists, and other school personnel should take.

<sup>2</sup>The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2004) defines *cultural competence* as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations" (p. 1).

<sup>3</sup>The term *minority* is offensive to some, suggesting less than or even being inaccurate in settings where people from nondominant cultures are in the majority. We use it sparingly—either when citing others' work or when a lengthy qualifying phrase would be awkward. Using the specific labels people choose for themselves is, of course, preferable, and we do so whenever possible.

### Why Focus on Parent Conferences?

Although the parent conference is just one strategy that schools use to engage parents, it is a pivotal exchange that deserves careful attention for several reasons. First, as mentioned, it is a virtually ubiquitous means for home-school communication. Second, the parent conference is almost a mini-laboratory for discovering how differences in values shape different understandings of children's development and create problems in home-school communication. Third, we have first-hand data on cross-cultural parent conferences, along with a simple method for analyzing parent communication that others can use to monitor the success of the conference (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000).

### When Is a Conference Cross-Cultural?

One thinks of a cross-cultural conference as one in which the parents are from one cultural background and the school professional(s) from another, but it is far more useful to think in terms of whether people are communicating across different value systems than across ethnicities. In this view, the cross-cultural parent conference is one in which the school psychologist or other service provider has internalized and operates from the perspective of the individualistic values of the school system, whereas the parents have internalized and operate from a contrasting sets of cultural values that are explored further in this chapter. The school professional's cultural values generate one set of educational priorities, whereas the parents' cultural values generate another. In this kind of situation, school professionals may interpret behaviors that serve parents' goals as evidence of deficiencies rather than differences (Lott, 2003).

Research supports the view that parents and teachers from the same ethnic group can find themselves having a cross-cultural conference (Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000). This can happen because the educational process that psychologists and educators go through tends to inculcate mainstream cultural values (Delpit, 1995; Nelson-Barber & Mitchell, 1992). These values, which have their origins in western Europe, are independence, autonomy, individual achievement, interpersonal competition, self-reliance, and the rights of the individual (cf. Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002).

### SOURCES OF MISCOMMUNICATION IN THE PARENT CONFERENCE

Miscommunication may have numerous causes, of course, but some can be avoided through understanding potential cultural differences. The consequences of miscommunication are not *neutral*. In fact, parents and school personnel alike have observed that it is a highly *negative* experience for both (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000; cf. Valdés, 1996).

### Different Expectations

Parents' expectations of their children, and of the school, guide how they interpret what the school psychologist says and vice versa. When there is miscommunica-

tion, it is often not the spoken words that cause the problem, but the (usually unconscious) expectations underlying the words that present stumbling blocks (cf., Lopez, 2002). When parents and school psychologists share common values, they are likely to share assumptions about the goals of child development and education. Such underlying agreement leads to a similar set of expectations for the child. When the participants do not share the same values, there is a real risk of misunderstanding. For instance, parents who have taught their children to show respect by listening rather than talking may be uncomfortable with the expectation that children speak out in class and express personal opinions. School personnel may interpret parents' discomfort as not valuing education or not being interested in the welfare of their own children.

### Power Differences

Power is not equally distributed throughout the larger society. Those from dominant groups (e.g., native-born, White, Euro-American, native-English-speaking, male, heterosexual) benefit from privileged status regardless of whether they recognize it (Lindsey, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2003). Because of power differences between minority parents and school personnel, the latter often prevail in decisions about students (Harry et al., 1995). The use of psycho-educational jargon by specialists may also contribute to the power differential by widening the gulf between parents and specialists (cf. Harry et al., 1995).

A common criticism of Latino immigrant families is that parents fail to show up for conferences related to the diagnosis of and educational planning for their special needs child (W. Laija-Rodriguez, personal communication, September 5, 2003). Perhaps many of them anticipate that their words will not be heard. One study of Mexican American mothers in the southwestern United States showed that the way school professionals communicated with them at their children's IEP conferences left them feeling alienated and disrespected (Salas, 2004). "[A]lthough these women wanted to be involved in the decision-making process regarding their children, they were silenced by overt or covert messages that told them their voices were not valued" (p. 181). We have found that our Bridging Cultures paradigm has the power to shift dynamics such as these.

## THEORETICAL AND RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS OF THE BRIDGING CULTURES PROJECT

### A Perspective on Culture

*Culture* has many definitions, perhaps the simplest being, "the total way of life of a people" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1954, p. 24). We take a "cognitive" (Fetterman, 1989, p. 27) approach to culture, focusing on its ideational or symbolic aspects: a group's ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge, and ways of acquiring knowledge and passing it on. It is these elements that are most germane to understanding where parents and schools may diverge.

Not only do individuals and groups have cultures, but institutions do as well. Schools have cultures, and school culture tends to look the same throughout dis-

tricts across the country (Hollins, 1996). For instance, in most cases, children are segregated by age and grade, an individual teacher is responsible for instruction in the elementary grades, individual grades are periodically assigned on report cards, and students move into separate content area classes in middle school. The list could go on. In fact, the norms of schools are nearly always based on the values of the larger society. In the case of many of the practices cited earlier, the underlying values of mainstream culture's individualism are apparent. In this respect, the school could be described as an important acculturating agent (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002).

### Research on Cross-Cultural Parent Conferences

Greenfield et al. (2000) videotaped nine parent conferences between immigrant parents from Mexico and El Salvador and their children's Euro-American teacher. The classroom was a combination of third and fourth grades. The conferences were naturally occurring, not specially scheduled for the study. The cross-cultural miscommunication issues revealed in the videotapes are equally likely to occur in the conferences that school psychologists have with Latino immigrant or other parents from less individualistic cultures, particularly those with little opportunity for formal education.

The parent-teacher meetings in the video study showed instances of both harmonious and discordant communication. However, there was considerably more discord than harmony in the social construction of children by teachers and parents (i.e., the ways each envisioned an ideal child in the classroom or family). Analysis of the communication patterns of the nine conferences revealed that far more often than not parent and teacher disagreed on goals for children. For example, teachers were more interested in discussing cognitive skills, whereas parents were more interested in talking about social behavior. The latter reflects an interdependent or collectivistic value orientation, whereas the former is representative of an independent or individualistic one.

### Individualism and Collectivism: Framing Constructs for the Bridging Cultures Project<sup>4</sup>

The continuum of individualism-collectivism represents the degree to which a culture emphasizes individual fulfillment and choice versus interdependent relations, social responsibility, and the well-being of the group. Individualism makes the former a priority, collectivism the latter. Although the dominant U.S. culture is extremely individualistic, many immigrant cultures are strongly collectivistic, as are Native American and Alaska Native cultures (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994) and African American culture in certain ways (Blake, 1994).

About 70% of the world's cultures could be described as collectivistic (Triandis, 1989). The fundamental difference between individualism and collectivism is the degree of emphasis on the individual versus the group. It could be characterized as

<sup>4</sup>The Bridging Cultures Project is described in Trumbull et al. (2001), as well as in Trumbull et al. (2003).

the difference between standing out and fitting in. In collectivistic cultures, people are more likely to identify their own personal goals with those of the group—extended family, religion, or other valued group (Brislin, 1993). When asked to complete the statement, "I am....," collectivists are more likely to respond with reference to an organization, family, or religion. Individualists tend to list trait labels, referring to aspects of their personalities, such as hard-working, intelligent, or athletic (Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988).

### The Utility of the Bridging Cultures Framework

A framework based on individualism and collectivism is both *economical* and *generative*. It is economical because it incorporates and explains the relationship among many elements that have previously been regarded as separate, such as conceptions of schooling and education, attitudes toward family, expectations for role maintenance or flexibility (including sex roles), duties toward elders, authority structures, attitudes toward discipline, ways of dealing with property, and many aspects of communication. The framework is generative because it suggests interpretations of and explanations for an endless set of interactions among students in a classroom, between school professionals and student(s), between school professionals and parents, and between a school and the communities it serves.

### Cautions Regarding Use of the Framework

*Variation within a cultural group.* A framework of individualism and collectivism is useful for understanding some of the most basic differences between cultures—differences with wide-ranging implications (Hofstede, 1983; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Yet we caution that characterizations of cultures are fraught with the potential for overgeneralization and stereotyping. Observable patterns of thought and behavior among cultural groups cannot be translated as predictors of individual behavior. Rather, they can point to meaningful differences whose understanding can improve cross-cultural relations within schools and other social institutions (Rogoff, 2003).

*Cultural complexity and change.* It must be emphasized that there are elements of both individualism and collectivism in any society, and that cultures change particularly when they come in contact with each other. As Goldenberg and Gallimore (1995) observe, "Both continuity and discontinuity across generations are part of the process of cultural evolution, a complex dynamic that contributes to change and variability within cultures" (p. 188). One example is how parents' views about what counts as appropriate education for girls have changed between the current and previous generation of Mexican American parents (cf. Valdés, 1996). In contrast to their parents, they may tend to believe that girls should have the opportunity to go to college.

*Differences in acculturation.* The process of becoming proficient in the ways of a culture is called *acculturation*. Acculturating to a new environment is different from person to person; it is influenced by the age at which one is faced with the need to function in a new culture, along with many other factors. Not only do one's

personal experiences influence the process, but the historical and social relationships between the old and new cultures also come into play (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002; Trumbull, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2003). For immigrant Latino families, for instance, values and practices vary based on the length of time they have been in the United States, the level of education they attained in their countries of origin, the length of time in an urban setting, and numerous other factors. In addition, cultures change over time on the basis of changes in their circumstances. There is strong evidence to suggest that, as they become more economically advanced and have greater access to formal education, cultures become more individualistic (Tapia Uribe, LeVine, & LeVine, 1994).

### MOVING BEYOND A SINGLE MODEL FOR CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The United States has a highly diverse population, representing peoples with many different cultural histories. Among them are recent immigrants from many countries, descendants of involuntary immigrants brought to the North American continent as slaves from Africa, descendants of colonized Mexicans, and indigenous peoples. Their historical roots continue to influence their childrearing, norms of social behavior and communication, as well as approaches to learning (Greenfield, 1994). Yet school psychologists' understanding about how children develop, learn, and communicate is shaped primarily by a Euro-American model that represents what is normal for only one segment of the students they serve. Based on our research with teachers, this is likely to be true even for school psychologists who come from collectivistic cultures, but who have been schooled in a Euro-American-style educational system (cf. Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000). School psychologists who have studied the usual developmental theories tend to value independence, autonomy, and individual achievement in young children and may not understand why some parents place more emphasis on cooperation and social development (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002).

### Inadvertent Alienation of Students and Parents

Divergent cultural expectations can lead students to feel as if they do not belong in the school, affecting their engagement in learning and, consequently, their achievement (Osterman, 2000). Likewise, parents can come to feel at home or alienated in their children's schools, on the basis of the ways in which the school and its personnel interact with them (McCaleb, 1997). A study of African American parents whose children needed special services concluded that, "the way parental participation was structured tended to delegitimize parental perspectives and that parents often withdrew from participation in confusion or resentment" (Harry et al., 1995, p. 365).

Many parents are offended by schools' assumptions that they need to be taught how to parent their own children (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998). Criticism of parents' childrearing practices is often implied (or stated) by school personnel, who believe they are acting in a student's best interests, but are ignorant of families' cultural values (Greenfield et al., 2000). If schools are to engender and sustain real parental involvement, they need to interrogate these kinds of practices and look to

frameworks for understanding cultural differences that can suggest alternative approaches.

### DIAGNOSING AND REPAIRING COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS DURING PARENT CONFERENCES<sup>5</sup>

As suggested, often the most serious communication problems are actually below the conversational level, in the kinds of assumptions each person is making about what is most important—for example, the individual child or the family unit, the child's social development, or the child's academic development. School personnel can employ some relatively simple strategies to shape communication that works for the needs of everyone: school psychologist, teacher, parent, and, ultimately, the child. To recognize cross-cultural value conflicts, school psychologists and other school personnel must go beyond conversational content to look at their interactions with parents. The school psychologist can monitor the success of the conversation by considering the following questions (based on the study by Greenfield et al., 2000):

1. Does the parent ratify (validate/acknowledge) a topic you have brought up by verbal or nonverbal means?
2. Does the parent verbally elaborate on the same topic you have introduced?
3. Does the parent confirm a specific comment or observation you have made?

Ratification, elaboration, and confirmation are all signs that the parent is in agreement with the school professional about the importance of what he or she is saying and that the parent agrees with the professional's interpretation of the facts (Greenfield et al., 2000). In such cooperative conversations, parent and professional are on the same wavelength. Of course, communication is a reciprocal process: Both professional and parent should be introducing topics and responding to the other's comments. Consequently, a school psychologist might want to reverse the roles in the prior questions and ask:

1. Do I ratify (validate) a topic the parent has brought up by verbal or nonverbal means?
2. Do I elaborate on the same topic the parent has introduced (verbally)?
3. Do I confirm a specific comment or observation the parent has made (verbally or nonverbally)?

Table 28-1 presents excerpts from actual parent conferences. The excerpts illustrate the applications of each of these questions.

<sup>5</sup>The text in this section is a close adaptation of material that in Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Quiroz (2001, pp. 59-69). Table 28-1 is adapted from material that appeared in Greenfield, Quiroz, and Raeff (2000) originally.

TABLE 28-1  
Discourse Samples From Actual Conferences

<i>A. Parent ratification of a topic introduced by teacher</i>	
1. Teacher:	Also I hope that she has, has time to read orally.
2. Mother:	(Nodding and smiling) Ahhuh.
3. Teacher:	And also silent every night.
4. Mother:	Ahhuh.
<i>B. Parent elaboration of a topic introduced by teacher</i>	
(Continuation of conversation above)	
5. Teacher:	With you orally and with her silent in the bed for a book which she has an interest
6. Mother:	Ahhuh. She took out from the library. How many? Seven?
<i>C. Parents' confirmation of teacher's comment</i>	
1. Teacher:	(Pointing to report card): Takes pride in her work. Most of the time her work is neat, but I'd like her to work a li: ttle bit harder on trying to make sure that just - not perfect, but [t as] =
2. Father:	Yeah.
3. Teacher:	As neat as possible.
4. Mother:	Yeah, a little bit.
5. Teacher:	Yeah, a little neater.
6. Mother:	A little bit neater.
7. Teacher:	Yeah, work on your handwriting a little bit.
8. Mother:	Yeah, she could improve it.
<i>D. Lack of parent ratification of a topic introduced by teacher</i>	
1. Teacher:	She's doing great. She's doing beautifully in English and in reading. And in writing, and in speaking.
2. Father:	Looks down at lap.
<i>E. Changing of teacher's topic by parent</i>	
(Continuation of conversation above)	
3. Teacher:	It's wonderful.
4. Father:	(Turning to point to younger son) The same, this guy, h[e]
5. Teacher:	(Interrupting, with shrill tone) [G]o: :d!
6. Father:	[He can] write =
7. Teacher:	(Cutting him off) He can write in English?
8. Father:	= Well, his name.

*Notes.* Examples A, B, and C are from one conference. Examples D and E are from another. Samples are from Greenfield, Quiroz, and Raeff, (2000), as adapted in Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Quiroz (2001).

*Key to linguistic notations:* : : symbolizes lengthening of a syllable; [...] when brackets are lined up vertically, the material in both sets of brackets was said simultaneously; = signs link parts of an utterance that was interrupted by another speaker

### Instances of Conversational Harmony (Cooperative Discourse)

Examples A and B in Table 28-1 show teacher and parent in apparent agreement that reading orally and silently are important activities for the child. They may not have the same reasons for believing so, but there is no conversational discord at this point. In Example C (taken from the same parent-teacher conference), one can see apparent agreement on a learning goal: the improvement of the child's handwriting. Note how harmonious the conversation is when the teacher makes a criticism about the child's handwriting and says it could be neater. This is because, in the value system of collectivism, criticism is valued as a way to help a child conform to group norms; collectivists worry about praise because it may develop conceit in a child (Greenfield et al., 2000; Lipka & Yanez, 1998). In contrast, in the value system of individualism, praise is valued as a way to help the child develop self-esteem; individualists worry about criticism because it may injure self-esteem. It is significant that such conversational harmony was found only in one conference, this one, in which the parents had been to high school in the United States and so had received considerable acculturation to individualism at a relatively young age (Greenfield et al., 2000).

### Instances of Conversational Discord (Noncooperative Discourse)

If a parent does not acknowledge what a school professional has said, becomes silent, or actually changes the topic, he or she probably either does not agree with what has been said or does not think the topic is important. Such conversation could be characterized as *noncooperative*. The examples labeled D and E in Table 28-1 show a striking failure in communication. The father does not pick up on the teacher's desire to talk about the child's academic success, and the teacher seems uncomfortable discussing the academic merits of another family member. The researchers explain:

The father shows discomfort when the teacher recognizes his daughter as outstanding, as she does in Turn 1; he responds by looking down at his lap in Turn 2. According to our analysis, her recognition may threaten the collectivistic goal of integrating each child as an equal contributing part of the family group. Hence when the teacher symbolically constructs his daughter as an outstanding individual learner, the father implicitly *reconstructs* her as a normative part of the family group by equating her academic skills to those of her younger brother. (Greenfield et al., 2000, p. 101)

Another videotaped parent-teacher conference reveals cross-cultural conflict around the issue of the student's verbal expression. The teacher has been talking about how well the child is using language to express herself and ask questions. When she asks the father toward the end of the conference whether he has any questions, he asks, "How is she doing? She don't talk too much?" (Greenfield et al., 2000, p. 102). By encouraging the child to talk more in class, the teacher is promoting behavior that is positively valued in school, but negatively valued in the child's home community, where respectful silence is the desired norm. This creates a conflict for both parent and child, and this type of conflict has the potential to alienate

children from their parents (or from the school). By the same token, it could alienate parents from their children or from their children's school (Greenfield et al., 2000).

### Monitoring the Communication

When the parent ratifies what the school professional is saying, elaborates on his or her comments, or confirms them, the communication is going well. Likewise, school professionals should note whether they are responding to parents' topics adequately. Awareness of the collectivistic perspective and possible points of conflict may enable professionals to repair communication breakdown. For example, perhaps the teacher in Table 28-1 could have started the conference by acknowledging the younger son and the family as a whole.

It is not worthwhile for school professionals to pursue a topic they have initiated when the parent has become disconnected from the dialogue. Yet this situation can be difficult for professionals. For example, it can be highly frustrating for school professionals who define their mission as the academic accomplishment of students to communicate with parents who value social comportment more highly and believe it to be the foundation for academic success (cf. Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002). Yet this latter value is a basic component of the collectivistic perspective. What can be done in such cases? Because the difference is one of priorities more than an either/or choice, one pragmatic strategy is for the professional to simply change the order of topics and deal with the parents' priority first. Once parents are reassured that the child is behaving correctly in class, they may be more open to hearing about academic or cognitive matters. The goal should be to find common ground, not to reform parents' notions of education or childrearing.

### Other Cultural Contexts

Although the conversational examples used here pertain to immigrant Latino parents and a Euro-American teacher, the strategies for monitoring a conversation can be used with other cultural combinations. Of course, to understand why conversational problems occur, it is necessary to know something about the backgrounds of both parents. The Bridging Cultures paradigm provides one important lens for analyzing conversational breakdown.

### Using Cultural Knowledge to Enhance Communication in the Conference

A school psychologist can become an ethnographer—one who learns directly from his or her students and parents about their cultures. Teacher aides, or paraprofessionals, who often are from the same background as the children are also an important source of cultural knowledge (Monzó & Rueda, 2001) and can serve as cultural brokers (Lewis, 2004). In many schools, they are the only adults who understand the cultures and speak the languages of students from groups that have recently emigrated. Even when the language of students is widely spoken, a paraprofessional who comes from the particular background of students and their families can bring critical cultural understanding into the realm of school. Other community members and professional colleagues from students' backgrounds—



as well as community-based organizations—are also invaluable resources for understanding students' lives and cultures (Collignon, Men, & Tan, 2001).

The suggestions outlined in Table 28-2 come from the perspective of a cultural insider, Blanca Quiroz. They parallel those found in the literature on cross-cultural communication (e.g., Lustig & Koester, 1999; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). As a parent who emigrated from Mexico in adulthood and later became a teacher and researcher, the author of these suggestions has been able to reflect on her own first-hand experience through the theoretical lens of individualism and collectivism. She draws on her cultural knowledge, as well as her experience on both sides of the parent conference. Again, although our context is working with immigrant Latino parents, this approach may well be helpful in many contexts, particularly with parents from other collectivistic cultures.

We do not mean to suggest that school personnel should memorize a set of rules for conversing with immigrant Latino parents or anyone from a collectivistic culture. Rather, we want to encourage them to learn enough about a collectivistic orientation to acquire a sense of how a parent from such a background might think and feel, and to come to understand the expectations such a parent might have of the school. Understanding the potential differences between a collectivistic culture at home and the mainstream culture at school can engender empathy, something that is far more helpful than prescriptions about question-asking or pronoun usage. But, then, empathy with the ways of the culture would naturally lead to respectful pronoun usage of the sort discussed in Table 28-2.

Knowledge of how individualism and collectivism operate also helps school personnel to adapt their interaction style to parents' styles. For example, Latino parents with more years of formal schooling, or who have been to school in the United States, may be more comfortable with a conference that focuses on academic achievement. Some students and families will have acculturated more than others, and this fact must be considered in approaching parents and in planning for a student's needs (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Helms, 1997; Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002). The key is to open the door to understanding differences and shape conferences accordingly.

It is clear that one conference style does not fit all. Participating in a parent conference in the ways schools expect may be alien to the parent whose home culture implicitly encourages the parent to listen respectfully to school personnel (Mapp, 2003; Pollock, Coffman, & Lopez, 2002). Hesitation to communicate in a parent conference should not be taken to mean lack of interest (Pollock et al., 2002). Rather, silence must be evaluated to determine whether it conveys respect, misunderstanding, or conflict.

#### APPROACH FOR IMPROVING PARENT CONFERENCES: EXAMPLES FROM THE BRIDGING CULTURES PROJECT

##### Time Allotment for Conferences

In the Bridging Cultures Project, we found that teachers were struggling with the logistics of parent conferences. One problem was that conferences were usually too short. In fact, 15 to 20 minutes per child is often all that is allocated within the

TABLE 28-2  
Fostering Communication With Immigrant Latino Families

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- Begin the conversation with a personal exchange, not with formal discussion of a student's progress or needs.
  - Maintain a personal connection throughout the conference. Parents may want to intersperse academic talk with informal talk.
  - If using Spanish, maintain use of the polite second-person pronoun (you) *usted*, rather than the familiar *tú*.
  - Show respect (*respeto*) by focusing on the family, not just the child who is being discussed or only on bureaucratic procedures and the purpose of the conference as the school sees it (see also Sosa, 1997).
  - Use indirect questions and be patient if it takes several attempts to gather information from the parents. For example, rather than ask if the student has a designated time and space for doing homework, the school professional may make an observation such as, "Sometimes parents say it's hard to seat their children at a specific place to do homework or study, because some of us live in small places and have other people around us all the time."
  - Recognize that the notion of "private space" is an individualistic one and may not be a natural concept for collectivistic families.
  - Recognize that establishing goals for children is a personal matter, and avoid approaching that process like the development of a business plan.
  - Refer to the experiences of other parents as a source of suggestions for solutions to problems rather than offering direct prescriptions. This approach acknowledges other parents' problem-solving strategies and helps parents without embarrassing them. It also situates the parent as part of a group of parents rather than as an individual.
  - Because modesty is valued by many immigrant Latino families, discuss students' achievements in the context of the classroom or peer group and emphasize how such achievements contribute to the well-being of the group.
  - Recognize that many immigrant Latino parents feel especially comfortable in hearing about areas where additional effort is needed for the child to come up to group norms and less comfortable with public praise (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000).
  - Do explain the expectations and goals of the school, but be aware that parents' goals may conflict with some of them. Work with parents to find common ground.
  - Create a sense of common purpose and communicate a message of caring through the use of the pronoun *we* rather than the pronouns *I* and *you*. This also communicates that parents and school personnel are a team.
- 

school schedule for parent-teacher conferences. Similarly, school psychologists and other members of the team who meet with parents to plan interventions or individualized educational plans (IEPs) for students may each be expected to cover specific issues in the space of a few minutes (Harry et al., 1995). However, if the conference is to be used to forge cross-cultural understanding when parents and teachers do not start off with the same assumptions about schooling and learning, even more time than usual is required. The Bridging Cultures teachers have continued to experiment with strategies for getting more time with parents. The results of this experimentation can be directly applied by school psychologists in IEP conferences with parents, for instance.

### Student-Led Conferences

It is not always evident to school professionals which innovations are culturally appropriate and which are not. For instance, having children who have become proficient in English translate for their parents who have not seems practical on the surface. However, according to some, "[p]lacing children in a position of equal status with adults creates dysfunction within the family hierarchy" for Latino parents (Finders & Lewis, 1994, p. 52).

A related problem was recognized by the teachers in the Bridging Cultures Project when they had a chance to discuss student-led conferences together in one of the whole-group meetings. At the time, student-led conferences were a highly recommended innovation. However, teachers came to realize, as a result of the Bridging Cultures workshops, that having students actually lead the conferences would violate role norms, but agreed that it would probably be acceptable for them to show their parents around the room and point out examples of their work to them. The professional should be taking the lead in discussing the child's progress, and then she or he and the parent(s) should jointly discuss what the child's needs are. Many districts have become enamored with student-led conferences, touting them as one way to promote student self-evaluation (e.g., Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). However, before student-led conferences become more widely institutionalized, questions should be raised about their appropriateness for families holding respect for elders as a cultural value.

### Group Conferences

Four teachers from the Bridging Cultures Project explored an alternative conference format that is culturally appropriate for their settings. It is possible that school psychologists could use this format when working with parents from more collectivistic cultures. The project teachers have found small-group conferences to be successful with immigrant Latino parents. A kindergarten teacher brought parents together on the basis of their children's ability groups. Grouping parents in that manner resulted in considerable verbal interaction among parents. In each group, at least one parent was willing to talk, and that seemed to make other parents comfortable to participate as well. A second-grade teacher had long met with parents in small groups, along with her two partner teachers—an arrangement she describes as reflecting the family approach she and her colleagues take. A third-grade teacher also found small groups to work better than individual conferences. She reflected on the first time she tried groups:

The parents shared so much, and it was heartfelt. They were thankful for the opportunity to get to know each other....Here they were, engaged in conversation—looking at common problems or goals, possibilities. They felt and expressed that it was different, and they were very thankful for it.

An upper elementary teacher did group conferences for the first time in the fall of 1998. A full account of her experience appears in Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Quiroz (2001). Here we quote briefly from her assessment of the method:

Parents seemed very pleased with the new approach to conferencing. A friendly, comfortable, and warm feeling came across during the conferencing. Many parents had questions that benefitted the other parents. Parents' conferencing together lent a source of mutual support, like family members all supporting each other.

The new group format organized by the teacher appears to be well liked, efficient, and culturally congruent for immigrant Latino parents. As teachers from the Bridging Cultures Project observe, such parents may feel more comfortable speaking in a group, with one parent's ideas stimulating another parent to comment or ask a question. A Bridging Cultures kindergarten teacher remarked that with group conferences the interaction is much more give and take, and she finds that she therefore does much less talking. As for teachers, group conferences mean that they get less burned out explaining the same thing over and over and can be more genuinely present to the experience. Perhaps most important, parents gain a sense of empowerment from the opportunity to participate as part of a group. This innovation might also have value for mainstream parents and help them develop a greater sense of community along with a concern for the development and accomplishments of other people's children.

It is important to find out from parents what they prefer, however. The group conference is an option, but it should not be automatically imposed on any set of parents any more than individual conferences or student-led conferences should be imposed without consideration for the particular cultural context. In fact, those teachers in the project who conduct group conferences always retain individual conferencing as an option for any parent.

### Issues of Interpretation and Translation in Parent Conferences

When school psychologists do not have a language in common with the parents in a conference, interpreters may be necessary. An important aspect of respect for the parents is to have an interpreter who is familiar with the concepts and terms that will be discussed in the parent conference (Lopez, 2002). For instance, if discussion focuses on special education placement, the interpreter needs to be familiar with appropriate terminology related to that topic. As Lopez (2002) notes, "For interpreters, it is particularly important to have a repertoire of vocabulary in the target language" (p. 1424) that accurately communicates diagnostic categories and psychological concepts in ways families will understand.

Another aspect of respect is to allow time for the interpreter to interpret before going on, as well as to give space and explicit permission for the interpreter to ask the psychologist if he or she does not understand something (W. Laija-Rodriguez, personal communication, September 5, 2003; Lopez, 2002). More generally, it is important to take into account the educational level of the parents and make communication less technical for those with a lower level of formal education. One of the teachers in the Bridging Cultures Project commented that the approach used by psychologists at the IEP parent meetings sometimes did not support parents' understanding of the implications of their child's assessment. When school personnel ask, "Do you *really* need a copy translated?" a respectful parent may feel obligated to decline asking for a translation, when in fact he or she truly does need a translation in order to have a meaningful record of the plan for the child. However, a



translation may in fact *not* be useful because it will be too technical to be understood by someone with the parent's level of formal education.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY

School psychologists, as a professional group, have been increasingly cognizant of the importance of culturally competent consultation with parents. As the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) Web site states, "Given the growing diversity of the U.S. population, it is imperative that school psychologists and other educational professionals engage in culturally competent practices" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2004, p. 5). Involving parents in their children's schooling is widely recommended (Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and legally required for students with an IEP; and studies show that minority parents *want* to be involved in their children's schooling (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Lott, 2001), but schools have often been unsuccessful in engaging them in the ways they would like (Chavkin & Williams; Lott, 2003). Part of the reason is that many minority families are under economic stress (Lott, 2003). Another reason is that schools tend to approach parents from a set of culture-based expectations that may not be comprehensible or attractive to them (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Trumbull et al., 2001).

School psychologists, as part of evaluation and intervention teams, can help engage parents meaningfully in framing plans for their own children if they are able to show understanding of and respect for parents' perspectives (Ortiz & Flanagan, 2002). Furthermore, when school psychologists understand potential cultural sources of difference in test performance or differences in the predictive validity of tests (depending on a student's background and experience), they can help parents and educators make the best sense of test outcomes (Helms, 1997).

The suggestions we offer are compatible with the philosophy of NASP, which has emphasized partnerships and collaborative goal setting between parents and school psychologists. According to Raffaele and Knoff (1999), "Effective home-school collaboration engenders parental empowerment through positive, meaningful two-way communication...based upon mutual respect and trust" (p. 452). Trust is, certainly, built to some degree on mutual understanding; and understanding requires some knowledge of the cultural values and personal histories that underlie surface behavior (Espinosa, 1995; Trumbull et al., 2001).

At this point, we would like to recommend three interrelated steps that could be taken to advance the agenda of cultural competence for school psychologists.

First, school psychologists should consider how cultural frameworks like the one used for Bridging Cultures could be uniquely applied to the work of school psychologists. Based on our work with teachers, we believe that the Bridging Cultures training is one promising resource to school psychologists, both for those in preparation and those currently in practice. The framework could be woven into graduate coursework with an assignment of observing conferences with parents for conflict along the dimensions of individualism and collectivism. For established practitioners, professional development akin to that of the Bridging Cultures longitudinal collaborative action research project could reveal new ways that school psychologists could learn to examine and increase cultural competence.<sup>6</sup>

The teachers in the Bridging Cultures Project had some ideas for applying Bridging Cultures to school psychology as a result of their work with school psychologists in the IEP planning process. Some of their comments point to the need to reach all school personnel with theoretically based and tested approaches to cross-cultural home-school collaboration. One teacher believed that knowledge of the Bridging Cultures framework definitely influenced his work with families of children with special needs:

I have always had good parent conferences. Now I know why I do what I do based on the Bridging Cultures framework. I believe that more culturally-sensitive teachers reach parents better. In the IEPs, parents are physically isolated from the rest of the group. In utilizing the framework, I always try to seat myself by the parents and discuss home issues so that parents feel they are contributing.

Another teacher noted:

It would be nice to see the parents a little more involved in the [IEP] process than I presently see. I believe that the Bridging Cultures framework helps foster collaborative relationships, which will enhance involvement of parents in the IEP. When I find success in using Bridging Cultures, I see the reaction more intensely from parents with children of special needs.

Second, empirical research should be conducted in order to learn more about what constitutes culturally competent (or perhaps incompetent) consultation with parents. A variety of methods from videotaping, to observation, interviews, and journaling could be used to identify more and less successful strategies for conducting cross-cultural parent conferences involving school psychologists and other school personnel. These investigations should address a range of contexts related to schools and the nature of the communities they serve. They should also be longitudinal: Building relationships with and learning from families takes time, and changes in practice are not likely to occur all at once. Moreover, permanent or long-term relationships are the ones most valued in a collectivistic cultural framework.

The *Bridging Cultures Teacher Education Module* (Rothstein-Fisch, 2003) could be piloted with small groups of school psychology candidates and in-service professionals, and then participants could be followed to determine the impact of such training on their attitudes, knowledge, and skills with families and students from diverse backgrounds. It is our experience that the framework stimulates immediate self-questioning and exploration. Teachers in the project found that they quickly experienced different attitudes toward families and soon thereafter engaged in new practices that had positive payoff for relationships with them (Trumbull et al., 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003).

Third, building on a strong Internet Web site, NASP members should establish and cultivate a site for school psychologists to share their experiences in exploring

<sup>6</sup>Our Bridging Cultures team is available for professional development; please contact Dr. Carrie Rothstein-Fisch at carrie.rothstein-fisch@csun.edu. West Ed, which supported the original Bridging Cultures Project, also offers workshops (see [www.wested.org](http://www.wested.org)).

culturally competent practices. For example, a school psychologist might want to try a group meeting with families who have children experiencing similar learning challenges. This experiment could be documented and shared with others.

## CONCLUSION

It is in the best interests of students' optimal development and learning to have school professionals who understand and engage parents in ways that respect and build on the strengths of the family as well as the resources of the school. Because of their skills in working with families, school psychologists can take a strong role in promoting good family-school connections (Epstein, 1992), in part as liaisons between parents and teachers (Christenson, Hurley, Sheridan, & Fenstermacher, 1997). When cultural competence is integrated into their repertoire of professional skills, school psychologists stand to have a crucial role in improving schools' responsiveness to families—a role that reflects the professional mission of those who serve children and families in the educational system. In such a role, school psychologists are in a unique position to continuously develop, emulate, and model cultural competence.

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Portions of this chapter appeared in Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, and Quiroz (2001)—specifically, the examples of parent-teacher discourse in parent conferences and strategies for improving communication with parents on pages 11–17. We would like to thank our seven teacher collaborators and WestEd, the regional laboratory based in San Francisco, for their support. We also thank Anna M. Pena and members of the California State University, Northridge faculty who helped us understand school psychology better.

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Trumbull, E., Rothstein-Fisch, C., Greenfield, P. M., & Quiroz, B. (2001). *Bridging cultures between home and school: A guide for teachers*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Although this book is titled *A Guide for Teachers*, it is useful to school psychologists because of the in-depth treatment of the topic of how to work cross-culturally with families. The book examines standard practices and suggests alternatives that are more appropriate for families who are not from mainstream cultures. Although the examples pertain to immigrant Latino families, many of the principles apply to families from any other culture that is more collectivistic than the dominant U.S. culture.

Rothstein-Fisch, C. (Ed.). (2003). *Readings for bridging cultures*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

As an adjunct to the *Guide*, this compendium of six articles ranges from a 12-page introduction to the Bridging Cultures Project to two articles about the empirical research on which the project is based. The first three articles are ideal for introductory professional development presentations.

Boethel, M. (2003). *Diversity: School, family, & community connections* (Annual Synthesis 2003). Austin, TX: National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

This review of 64 recent key research studies on "diversity as it relates to student achievement and school, family, and community connections" (p. v) is an excellent resource for school professionals. By scanning through the studies that are summarized, one begins to appreciate the importance of schools', communities', and families' working together. The final chapter summarizes 12 specific strategies to strengthen home-school connections, all based on the research presented.

## RESOURCES

Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE):  
<http://crede.berkeley.edu>

The Center has publications and summaries of research that can be downloaded. A subsection of the CREDE Web site (<http://www.crede.org/links/diversity.html>) has links to dozens of organizations concerned with diversity in education.

Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE):  
<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html>

FINE is a service of the Harvard Family Research Project. It is a network of over 4,000 educators who are interested in fostering partnerships among schools, families, and communities. Many useful publications can be downloaded from this site.

National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools:  
[www.sedl.org/connections/](http://www.sedl.org/connections/)

This Web site is dedicated to linking research and practice in the area of home-school-community connections.

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## VII

## FUTURE PERSPECTIVES