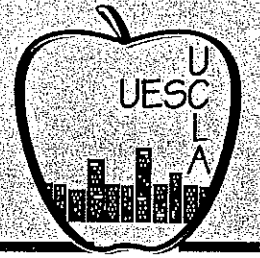


CONNECTIONS

... bridging educational research and practice



Urban Education Studies Center • Corinne A. Seeds University Elementary School
• Graduate School of Education & Information Studies • UCLA

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-

continued on page 8

FALL 1998

Also in this issue:

Preparing Students to
Work Collaboratively...3

Helping Transnational
Students Connect Their
Life Experiences to
Academic Skills.....6

Bridging Cultures

continued from front cover

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

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.

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.

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

continued on page 9

Bridging Cultures

continued from page 8

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.

continued on page 10

Bridging Cultures

continued from page 9

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

Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1994). Socializing Young Children in Mexican-American Families: An Intergenerational Perspective. In P. M. Greenfield and R. R. Cocking (Eds.), *Cross-Cultural Roots of Minority Child Development* (pp. 55-86). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Goldenberg, C., and Gallimore, R. (1995). Immigrant Latino Parents' Values and Beliefs about Their Children's Education: Continuities and Discontinuities. In P. Pintrich and M. Maehr (Eds.), *Advances in Achievement Motivation* (vol. 9). (pp. 183-228). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Greenfield, P. M., Quiroz, B., and Raeff, C. (in press). Cross-Cultural Conflict and Harmony in the Social Construction of the Child. In S. Harkness, C. Raeff, and C. M. Super (eds.), *The Social Construction of the Child: The Nature of Variability, New Directions in Child Development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Greenfield, P. M., Raeff, C., and Quiroz, B. (1996). Cultural Values in Learning and Education. In B. Williams (Ed.), *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices* (pp. 37-55). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

continued on page 11

Bridging Cultures

continued from page 10

Greenfield, P. M., Raeff, C., and Quiroz, B. (1998). Cross-Cultural Conflict in the Social Construction of the Child, *Aztlán*, 23, 115-125.

Quiroz, B., and Greenfield, P. M. (in press). "Cross-Cultural Value Conflict: Removing a Barrier to Latino School Achievement." To appear in a volume on *Latino Academic Achievement* edited by R. Paredes and K. Gutierrez. Latino Eligibility Task Force, University of California.

Raeff, C., Greenfield, P. M., and Quiroz, B. (in press). Conceptualizing Interpersonal Relationships in the Cultural Contexts of Individualism and Collectivism. In S. Harkness, C. Raeff, and C. M. Super (Eds.), *The Social Construction of the Child: The Nature of Variability, New Directions in Child Development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Reese, L., Balzano, S., Gallimore, R., and Goldenberg, C. (1995). The Concept of *Educación*: Latino Family Values and American

Schooling. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 23, 57-81.

Rothstein-Fisch, C., Trumbull, E., Quiroz, B., and Greenfield, P. (1997, June). *Bridging Cultures in the Classroom*. Poster presented at the Jean Piaget Society for the Study of Knowledge and Development, Santa Monica, CA.

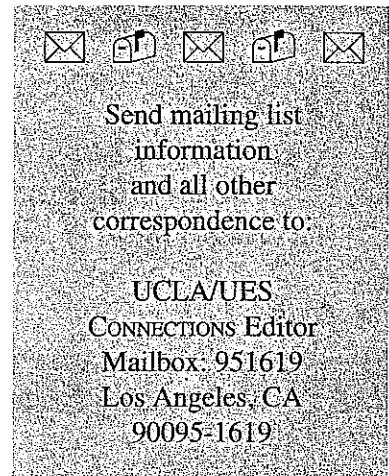
Valdés, G. (1996). *Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Acknowledgments

The Bridging Cultures project is a collaboration between researchers and teachers. The teachers are from the Los Angeles Unified School District, the Ocean View School District in Oxnard, and the Los Nietos School District in Whittier. The researchers are from UCLA, WestEd, and California State University, Northridge. The research itself grew out of a collaborative effort involving the UCLA Psychology Department, the UCLA Urban Education Studies Center, Stoner Avenue Elementary School in the Los Angeles Unified

School District, and the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Initiative. The authors would like to thank the Bridging Cultures members for comments on an earlier draft.

Blanca Quiroz is a former Los Angeles Unified School District teacher and a current doctoral student at Harvard University. Patricia Greenfield is a professor in the UCLA Psychology Department. Marie Altchech is a teacher at Stoner Avenue Elementary School in the Los Angeles Unified School District.



Are you on our mailing list?

Do you have a friend or colleague who would like to receive CONNECTIONS? Would you like to be on our mailing list but have not sent in a request? Fill out this form to (check one):

add a friend's name add your name make a correction remove your name from our mailing list

Name _____ Preferred Mailing Address:

Street _____ Apt. or Suite # _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

School/Institution _____ Phone () _____

Position (circle) 1. Teacher: grade level _____ 2. Administrator 3. Researcher 4. Other (please specify)

Subject areas of interest _____