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Bridging Cultures with a Parent-Teacher Conference

When teachers acknowledge and adapt to different cultural values, they can work collaboratively to strengthen the learning environment of the whole community.

A Latina immigrant mother remembers a parent-teacher conference with her daughter's 1st 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 show my daughter not to "show off," but it seemed that it was not working.

Parent-teacher conferences are a prime occasion for cross-cultural communication. The issue of being "outstanding" is fraught with cross-cultural misunderstanding between teachers and Latino immigrant parents. The opening vignette illustrates two cultural models at play (Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, in press).

Cross-Cultural Conflicts About Values

The teacher expressed an individualistic perspective: She assumed that the primary goal of development is to become an outstandingly competent individual. The mother interpreted "outstanding" as "standing out," something to be avoided in her culture. She was expressing an important element of the collectivistic model, which exphasizes fitting into and being a contributing member of a group.

Each cultural model consists of a set of assumptions that the group takes for granted and therefore does not recognize as cultural in origin. Each model also defines a set of criteria for evaluating child development and for guiding socialization; these models sometimes conflict when Latino immigrants enroll their children in public schools in the United States. For example, *educación,* the Spanish cognate for *education,* primarily refers to instruction in correct social demeanor; in contrast, the English equivalent, *education,* refers primarily to academic instruction (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995).

This conflict does not occur with every Latino parent. It is as presumptuous to assume that all Latinos hold the same developmental and socialization goals as it is to assume that everyone should hold the developmental goals of mainstream U.S. education. Latinos are very diverse, differing in social class and education before immigration, rural or urban origin, country of origin, acculturation, and race. Therefore, teachers need to *explore* cultural values systems, not *assume* them. Nonetheless, the sociohistorical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural conditions experienced by large numbers of recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America provide a basis for a common pattern of adaptation and collectivistic cultural values (for example, Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, in press; Valdés, 1996).

Parent-teacher conferences are a prime situation for cross-cultural miscommunication.

Likewise, teachers' behavior is not specific to a particular ethnic group. Latino teachers, like others, undergo an individualizing process that is part of higher education and teacher training (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1996; Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, in press; Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Quiroz, & Greenfield, 1997). Culture lies in values and practices, not in ethnic labels.

Latino immigrant families are very interested in their children's education (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995). However, parents from Mexico and El Salvador who arrive with little education do not necessarily realize that they and their children will be asked to give up collectivistic values in pursuit of educational achievement. In the interdependent perspective of Latino immigrant parents, education is a tool not for developing the individual potential of each child, but for enabling each child to help the family as a whole.

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The Bridging Cultures Project: A Teacher Responds

Bridging Cultures (Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1998) is an ongoing cross-cultural professional development effort that allows a group of California teachers and researchers to collaboratively apply research on cross-cultural value conflict in schools to the education of children from Latino immigrant families (Rothstein-Fisch, 1997; Trumbull et al., 1997). During a Bridging Cultures workshop, one teacher-participant responded to our analysis of her conferences with Latino immigrant parents:

> My awareness of the cultural differences between collectivistic and individualistic groups has been heightened. . . . Now not only do I realize that there are differences, but also I greatly appreciate the concept that a bridge must be constructed so that I do not value one over the other.
>
> However, this leads to a conflict. What should be the ultimate goal of a teacher? Should it be to facilitate 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.
>
> I feel that the parent conference situation is not easily resolved. First, I have a time constraint of 15 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. My conflict arises with understanding what kind of success this child should be striving for. If it's academic, it may conflict with the family's definition of success as a supportive member of [the] family. But parents explain to me that they immigrated here "to better their lives," so perhaps academic achievement is in alignment with this goal.

The Child-Led Versus the Group Conference

During the Bridging Cultures workshops, teachers proposed alternative practices

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for conducting parent-teacher conferences, and experimentation ensued.

A culturally incompatible format. The teacher previously quoted experimented with the child-led conference. Despite its current popularity, this format turns out to be incompatible with Latino culture: By putting the child in the leadership role, the child-led conference violates the collectivistic cultural value in which children respect and look up to their parents as authority figures.

A culturally compatible format. The next year, the teacher developed a successful social format for the parent-teacher conference. In a later Bridging Cultures workshop, she described her approach:

> In the prescribed practice of parent conferencing, teachers allot 10 to 15 minutes for each parent. They use this time to review a child's academic progress, report card, social skills, and state test scores. Most of the time, other parents are waiting, or several parents arrive at the same time. In many circumstances, the appointment 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, I redesigned my parent conferencing into group conferences. For families who couldn't attend, I arranged a separate time. I divided my children by ability levels and language into one English-speaking group and two Spanish-speaking groups. My paraprofessional translated for the Spanish language groups. I prepared the children for their part in the conferencing by role playing the student and parent parts during the previous week.
>
> Most of the parents arrived on time and sat with me in a circle. The children presented their parents, mostly mothers, with a folder that contained test scores, their report card, a parents' tips list, and a hard-to-understand booklet for interpreting test scores. I explained the percentiles and stanines of the Stanford 9 or Aprenda and how the parents could use the results to know which academic areas are strong and which need improvement. I explained the report card format and the meaning of the marks and discussed my expectations for the next quarter. I also discussed what I could do to help students progress academically as well as how the parents could help at home.
>
> A comfortable and warm feeling came across during the conferencing. Many parents had questions that benefited the others. The children, once the group session was over, excitedly escorted their parents and siblings to their desks to share and discuss their portfolios. Thy took their parents on a tour of the room to show their displayed work.
>
> The group conferencing was relaxing for the parents. It was a less threatening environment than the individual conferencing style; parents supplied support and were company for one another. This format provided a group voice from the parents rather than an individual voice. After one hour, parents could sign up for a private conference or ask a few questions privately.
>
> My new format was successful. I saw all 28 parents in three days. The conference design impressed my principal, who asked me to lead a staff development program on the subject. I see this conferencing format as an evolving process.

Achieving Harmony

The Latino parents interpreted the teacher's ability to coordinate the group conference as a display of the social skills appropriate to her position as the leader of her classroom domain. From the parents' perspective, the teacher demonstrated that she could integrate a group of individuals into a harmonious multiparty interaction with explicit and common goals. At the same time, she let children play the role of active partici-

pants, a role valued by the school. Latino parents often value harmonious group interaction more highly than one-on-one interaction. In contrast, the individualistic worldview places high value on individual attention and privacy and sees one-on-one interaction as the ideal for social interaction; the social format of the standard parent-teacher conference reflects this value.

Initially, this teacher focused on the pragmatic difficulties of integrating different values into a parent-teacher conference, achieving the accomplishments she expected, and interpreting the parents' goals. Through the Bridging Cultures workshop process and through her own experimentation, she realized that she did not need to convert to someone else's cultural orientation to understand and accommodate that person's needs and perspectives. Goals that initially seemed incompatible became mutually reinforcing in her new group-conferencing format. She gave the parents of each group of similarly achieving students an overview of academic progression on the group level, without singling out individuals. She used a family process—parent-child communication—to present parents with their children's individual work. And she provided an opportunity for parent-teacher consultation on individual problems.

Most important, however, was the teacher's realization that including families' cultural perspective on social interaction could benefit students as well as herself. This process is not easy. To accept that one's own perceptions are not the only ones or even the better ones requires humility. These qualities can be threatening to people raised in a culture that places a high priority on building and protecting self-esteem.

One important outcome of the Bridging Cultures process was the participants' realization that, as educators, they function under the implicit assumptions of their own cultural framework. This step is necessary to build respect for differences and a sincere acknowledgment that diversity has value. ■

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