Parent Involvement in Schooling—According to Whose Values?

Elise Trumbull, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, and Elvia Hernandez

Abstract

Through the Bridging Cultures Project, a longitudinal collaborative action research project, seven elementary school teachers working with immigrant Latino students and families learned about a framework for understanding culture, as well as how to conduct ethnographic inquiry, in order to learn about the particular families they serve. Learning about the constructs of "*individualism*" and "*collectivism*" enhanced teachers' understanding of their own cultures, the culture of U.S. schools, and the cultures of their immigrant Latino students.

In this paper, we describe how changes in the teachers' understanding of culture influenced their thinking, their professional practice, their relationships with parents, and—consequently—parents' involvement in schooling. Even within this small group of teachers, variability in innovation and implementation of strategies is evident, reflecting how cultural factors, personal factors, and other factors influence teacher change and parent involvement.

Keywords: parent involvement, culture, home-school relationships, ethnography, collaborative action research

Introduction

The Bridging Cultures Project, begun in 1996 by a group of four researchers and seven elementary teachers, has had a positive impact on teachers' relationships with parents and on parents' involvement in schooling. In this paper, we

focus on teacher innovations that are associated with these positive outcomes. Underlying teachers' actions are shifts in ways of thinking about culture, child-rearing, and schooling—shifts that are apparent in their first-hand accounts and reflections.

We will first situate our Project in the larger context of parent involvement in schooling, then describe the Project, and next explore the specific changes that enhanced home-school relationships and the involvement of parents in their children's schooling. Finally, we discuss other factors that can influence parent involvement and reflect on the potential for greater, more culturally-responsive inclusion of parents in the schooling process.

Perspectives on Parent Involvement in Schooling

Parent involvement in schooling takes many forms—among them, volunteering in the school, helping students with homework, and participating in school governance (Epstein, 1995). It is widely valued (Chavkin, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; National Education Goals Panel, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 1994) and continues to gain support as one of six areas of emphasis in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. There is a widespread presumption, not unequivocally supported by existing research, that parents' involvement in their children's schooling supports higher student achievement (Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). Of course, different forms of involvement could be expected to have different kinds of impact, and it is apparent that more rigorous evaluation research needs to be conducted across the board to determine relationships between particular practices and particular outcomes (Mattingly et al.). In the meantime, given the continued official and popular support for parent involvement, it is likely to continue be at the top of the list of goals of schools across the country for some time to come.

Many parent involvement programs target "minority"[1] parents (Mattingly et al., 2002), but schools have had particular difficulty in involving them (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Moles, 1993). This is an unfortunate outcome, if not surprising, since research suggests that "minority" parents want very much to be involved with their children's schools (Allexsaht-Snider, 1992; Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Diaz, 2000; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995). One obstacle to parent participation is the unequal distribution of power, resources, and knowledge within U.S. society (Young, 1999). Cultural differences are surely a factor as well, but they are rarely considered except as a source of deficiency in parenting (Casanova, 1996). However, it is apparent that "[s]chools facilitate the exclusion of…

parents by (consciously or unconsciously) establishing activities that require specific majority culturally based knowledge and behaviors about the school as an institution" (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991, p. 21).

Where they perceive a language barrier, schools sometimes hire translators (deKanter, Ginsburg, Pederson, Peterson, & Rich, 1997; Gorman & Balter, 1997), but problems in cross-cultural communication are often due to conflicts between parents' values and the implicit values of the school rather than to language (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2000; Valdés, 1996). Many schools provide parent education on child-rearing and academic tutoring (Epstein, 1998), but parents may resent being told how to rear their children (Onikama, Hammond, & Koki, 1998) or may not think it appropriate to assume an academic teaching role with their children (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Valdés, 1996). When parents don't accept the roles that schools expect, teachers may negatively evaluate them (Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993).

Surveying the literature on parent involvement, one is struck with the lack of mutuality in the bargain. Couldn't parents and schools negotiate the ways parents will be involved? What about the possible development of a hybrid school culture that reflects elements of both the dominant culture and the cultures of the families in the wider school community—both in the classroom and in interactions between parents and the school (cf., Banks, 1988; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999)?

Our perspective is that "minority" parent involvement in children's schooling is a positive thing to the degree that it can result in (a) teachers' increased understanding of the families and communities children come from, (b) parents' increased understanding of how schools operate, and (c) opportunities for mutually-forged school culture. But until schools (meaning teachers, administrators, other personnel, and school boards) understand how cultural values influence goals and practices of child-rearing, views of education, and ways that people interact, they will not succeed in attaining the kind of "minority" parent involvement they claim to want or in providing the best education for "minority" students.

The Bridging Cultures Project

The Individualism/Collectivism Framework

Immigrants from Mexico and Central and South America, especially the rural poor and those with limited access to formal education, tend to be from collectivistic cultures (Greenfield & Cocking, 1994; Triandis, 1989).

"Collectivism" refers to a cluster of interrelated values that reflect a particular worldview and motivate a whole range of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. From this value system's perspective, children are part of a family with inter-dependent members. Sharing and helping others are essential because the goal of collectivism is group/family interdependence. Collectivism is the culture of immigrants to the United States from many parts of the world. In fact, 70% of the world's cultures can be characterized as collectivistic (Triandis, 1989).

In contrast, the dominant European-American culture of the U.S (and of U.S. schools) is individualistic. Individualism represents a set of values as-sociated with independence, self-expression, and personal autonomy and achievement. From the perspective of this value system, children are individu-als who need to become independent of their families. In the Bridging Cultures Project, researchers used a framework incorporating these two value orienta-tions as a way to help teachers become aware of the deep meaning of culture and how it affects everything from how schools implement federal breakfast programs to how they approach literacy.

Table 1 summarizes several important contrasts between the two value sys-tems. The individualism/collectivism framework was chosen because many of the sources of conflict experienced by Latino immigrant students and their par-ents with U.S. schools can be explained with reference to this framework (Raeff et al., 2000; Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000). The current research focuses on teachers of Latino immigrant children, but the framework has also been useful in understanding conflicts experienced by other cultural groups, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians (Greenfield & Cocking,1994).

Of course, no individual or culture is completely individualistic or col-lectivistic; there is enormous variation within a single culture in the degree to which its members embrace the culture's core values. One could never accu-rately make any sweeping generalization about "all Latinos" or "all Latino im-migrants." However, by any measure imaginable, the dominant U.S. culture is perhaps the most individualistic culture in the world (Triandis, 1989), so that children who grow up in it experience a powerful push to be individualistic. This is a direct contrast to the ways children in the majority of the world's cultures are socialized—hence the usefulness of a framework that highlights the differences between the two orientations (as risky as such heuristics can be). The framework is, however, only a good starting point for exploring value differences between home and school. There is no substitute for first-hand knowledge of families. Some parents will accommodate to dominant culture expectations more than others, and it is a well-accepted maxim that when two cultures meet, both are changed.

Table 1. Individualism and Collectivism: Relative Emphases

Individualism	Collectivism
1. Child as individual	1. Child as part of the group
2. Independence	2. Helpfulness
3. Cognitive skills independent of social skills	3. Social and cognitive skills integrated
4. Self-expression	4. Listening to authority
5. Parents' role is to parent and teach; teachers' role is to teach.	5. Parents' role is to parent; teachers' role is to teach and foster moral development
6. Personal property	6. Shared property

Methods

The project could be characterized as "collaborative action research" (Calhoun, 1993), as "research on teaching," as "teacher research" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993), or as an example of a professional development program. In fact, it has elements of all four. When the project is considered *in toto*, it most resembles a collaborative action research project (see Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001; Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, Hasan, & Rothstein-Fisch, 2001).

Participating Teachers and Researchers

Seven elementary school bilingual teachers[2] serving primarily students whose families have immigrated to southern California from Mexico (or, to a lesser extent, Central America) participated in the Project. Four of the teachers were Latino; three were European-American. Two teachers were born in Mexico, one in Peru, and one in Germany; all four had immigrated to the United States as young children. Three teachers were born in the United States. Teachers were identified either by one of the staff researchers or by word of mouth as potential participants because of their interest in better serving their Latino students.

The participating teachers included one male and six females from a total of six schools in the Los Angeles area; two were from one school.[3] The teachers' grade assignments ranged from kindergarten to fifth grade, with every grade level represented by at least one teacher. All seven teachers were bilingual in English and Spanish, to varying extents. The teachers were all experienced, with years of teaching service ranging from 5 to 21 (Mean = 12.7) at the outset of the Project.

Four staff researchers from three institutions organized the project.[4] Three of the researchers were European-American; one was a Mexican immigrant

who had come to this country as a married adult with a young family. The academic backgrounds of the staff research team included education, cross-cultural psychology, psycholinguistics, human development, and Latin American studies. Two members of the research team had done prior research in Mexico or among Latino immigrants in Los Angeles; one member had worked with American Indian and other cultural groups.

Procedures: The Project's Three Phases

Phase I

In Phase I, the staff researchers designed and presented a series of three workshops (lasting four hours each) on theory and research related to individualism and collectivism, attended by all seven teachers. In the first workshop, the teachers were given a pre-assessment targeting their awareness of individualism and collectivism, along with a questionnaire regarding their cultural and teaching backgrounds. They were then introduced to the research demonstrating the potential conflict between individualism and collectivism in schools (Raeff et al., 2000).

It is important to recognize that the professional development approach was not prescriptive; there was no defined program of change. Rather, teachers who had a commitment to improving education for underserved immigrant students came together voluntarily with researchers to investigate the possibility that learning about "deep" culture (Hollins, 1996) would have a payoff for their students.

In the second workshop the teachers discussed their observations of individualism and collectivism at work in their classrooms as well as in their own personal lives. Researchers scaffolded discussions and offered other research-based examples. Teachers were next asked to make a change in their classrooms based on their new cultural understanding and report about it at the third meeting. In the final workshop, the teachers explained their classroom changes and perceived impact, completed a post-assessment, discussed their future goals for the project, and evaluated the training in an exit survey.

Phase II

In Phase II, the teachers moved firmly into the role of teacher-researcher and explored applications of the framework to classroom and school practices. During Phase II, the staff researchers and the seven teachers continued to meet bimonthly as a team. The meetings served both as continued professional development and as research opportunities to document changes in teachers' thinking and practice related to topics such as content area instruction, working with parents, assessment, and application of the framework to other

cultural groups. Staff researchers periodically observed in teachers' classrooms and conducted extended interviews with each teacher. In addition, teachers responded to writing prompts and interest surveys to help guide the planning of future meetings.

Phase III

The third phase has focused on dissemination to preservice and inservice educators, professional developers, and researchers (documented in Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, et al., 2001). Six of the seven teachers have provided professional development either at their own schools or to educators in other settings. In actuality, the three project phases overlapped to some degree. Even before the second of the three workshops, teachers were moving into the research role (observing and making changes in their classrooms); presentations by the team began within the first year of the project; and struggles to understand implications of the theory for practice (and of practice for the theory) continue to this day.

Data Sources

Table 2 lists the principal data sources for Phases I and II of the Project (the phases germane to this paper). Teachers' changes in thinking and practice were documented largely through (a) pre- and post-assessments of cultural awareness, (b) videotapes of the three workshops and the first follow-up meeting, (c) field notes from bimonthly meetings, (d) observations by staff researchers in teachers' classrooms, and (e) extended, open-ended, periodic interviews of the teachers. Detailed descriptions of interactions with parents and situations involving home-school conflict or harmony were written by the teacher-researchers or dictated to staff researchers. On some occasions, staff researchers had the opportunity to observe parents and other volunteers in the teacher-researchers' classrooms.

This paper draws from many of these sources, but most heavily from the series of lengthy interviews conducted by Rothstein-Fisch in early 2000. Unless otherwise noted, teachers' quotations come from those interviews. The credibility of teachers' reports is substantiated by observations done by staff researchers. The third author, Mrs. Elvia Hernandez,[5] is a project participant who has taught kindergarten, first, and second grades during the past twelve years in schools with large Latino immigrant populations. She is a Mexican immigrant who is fluent in Spanish and continues to have strong family ties to Mexico. Her perspective informs our interpretation of the findings we report.

Table 2. The Bridging Cultures Project: Phases, Processes, and Data Sources

Phase I: Professional Development	
Three Workshops *Workshop 1* • Introduction to the individualism/ collectivism framework *Workshop 2* • Continued exploration of the framework and related classroom examples, teachers' observations *Workshop 3* • Examples of teachers' observations and innovations, impact of innovations, goals for future	Data Sources • Pre- and post-assessments to evaluate teachers' knowledge of individualism/ collectivism • Teacher background questionnaires • Videotapes of workshops • Field notes from workshops
Phase II: Teachers as Researchers	
Meetings of Teacher-Researchers and Staff Researchers • 24 meetings of 4 hours each • Teachers engaged in reflection, reporting, group discussion • Some meetings focused on specific topics (literacy, math, assessment, learning about non-Latino cultures) Classroom Observations by Staff Researchers • Extended observations of all teachers at least twice, approximately one year apart	Data Sources • Field notes on teacher practices and thinking (from meetings) • Videotape of first meeting • Videotapes of a Bridging Cultures classroom and a non-Bridging Cultures classroom (UCLA student research) • Extended field notes from UCLA student research • Field notes from all observations • Teachers' written reflections • Debriefing interviews following all observations • In-depth phone interviews 3 years after initial training • Interviews with specific teachers for purposes of publication and dissemination

Overall Results

All seven teachers acquired new cultural awareness of themselves, their schools, students, and families. This change in awareness was almost immediate, manifesting itself clearly on the contrasting responses to the pre- and post-assessments. Whereas on the pre-assessment, teachers' responses were almost uniformly individualistic (even when teachers were prompted to try to take the perspective of a Latino immigrant parent), on the post-assessment at the end of the third workshop teachers demonstrated the ability to take both

an individualistic and a collectivistic perspective (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Quiroz, & Greenfield, 1997). Their new awareness translated quickly into innovations in practice and altered relationships with students, families, and school personnel. Some changes involved curriculum, instruction, and assessment (see, e.g., Trumbull, Greenfield, Rothstein-Fisch, & Maynard, 1999; Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, & Hasan, in press; Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, et al., 2001; Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Isaac, Daley, & Pérez, 2003). Other changes related to home-school communication and parent involvement.

Understanding of the kinds of core cultural differences described in Table 1 served as a foundation for all of the changes observed and reported. Most of all, it allowed teachers to recognize that parents' child-rearing practices and expectations of school were not random deviations from a fixed norm. Rather, they were likely to be based on a coherent set of culture-based values.

Ten Changes vis-à-vis Parents and Families

It was in the realm of relations with parents and families that many of the teachers' changes in practice were first documented. Figure 1 lists the ten changes observed. We have organized them in three categories; however, it is obvious that many of the changes are interrelated. We will give an overview of the changes and then examine each one in turn, with specific examples from teachers.

Figure 1. How Teachers Changed in Relation to Parents and Families.

Increased Proximity to Families
- Increased personal involvement with parents/families
- Increased informal interactions with parents/families at school
- Increased ability to take parents' perspectives

Designed New Classroom Practices
- Altered schedules to accommodate parents/families
- Introduced new forms of parent-teacher conferences
- Tried new approaches to engaging parent volunteers

Explored New Roles
- Became ethnographers
- Became more effective advocates for students and families
- Explained school culture to parents more explicitly
- Supported parents in taking on new roles

Not every teacher reported every change. In some cases, a teacher had already been engaging in practices such as home visits or seeking maximum opportunities for informal contact with parents. Yet, in these cases, teachers have talked about how participation in the project has given a "name" to practices that seemed appropriate and "a reason to continue" with them. With regard to other categories of change, there was considerable variation in manner and degree. For example, while all teachers reported more personal contact with parents, only one gave evidence of extensive and effective new approaches to developing new cadres of parent volunteers. The three broad elements of change did not reveal themselves in linear fashion, though some did come before others. They are intertwined, and this fact becomes even more apparent as we try to write about them; yet it seems useful to examine them separately to the degree we can.

Increased Proximity to Families

Increased personal involvement and increased informal interactions with parents and families were reported early on as ways to bring teachers into greater proximity to families. The proximity is not just physical, but also psychological: As teachers engaged more with families, their interpersonal relationships changed. Furthermore, changes in this realm clearly supported an increased ability to take parents' perspectives.

Increased Personal Involvement and Increased Informal Interactions
These first two elements go hand in hand. Many parents from "minority" backgrounds indicate they would prefer a more personal relationship with their children's teachers (Diaz, 2000; Finders & Lewis, 1994; McCaleb, 1997). "Minority" parents have also indicated that they would like opportunities to interact informally, not just through formal events like open house or parent conferences (see, e.g., Diaz, 2000). Bridging Cultures teachers had already observed parents' apparent desire for more personal and less formal interactions and were accommodating that desire in various ways—but not always happily or comfortably. Now they understand parents' expectations in a different way.

Sharing One's Own Experiences. Mrs. Hernandez notes,

> I find myself being more personal and sharing experiences [about] my own children as they relate to their [the parents'] kids. I try to follow up on things they have shared with me and ask about former siblings that were in my class—ask how they are doing. I keep in touch with families that were formerly in my class as a result of being in Bridging Cultures. But I try to keep the relationship professional. I don't get into the buddy-buddy relationship with them.

Her final comment makes the point that other teachers have made: While they are more personal than they might have been, they still maintain their professional role as teachers—something that is actually quite harmonious with a collectivistic perspective.

Maximizing Contact at School. All teachers gave examples of how they attempted to maximize contact with parents. Second grade teacher Ms. Catherine Daley "formalized" the informal contact by consciously seizing every opportunity to exchange even a few words with her students' parents. She notes,

> One of our school rules directs the teachers to accompany their students to the exit gate and to remain there until the parents arrive or until the gate is closed. I take this opportunity to have mini-conferences with the parents. These conversations may never even deal with the child. They may touch on the weather or any other social topic. It may even be just a simple greeting. Yet I find that these interactions foster a closer bond with the parents…(Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001, p. 77).

Going to the Community. First grade teacher, Ms. Pearl Saitzyk, said,

> I think it was more harmonious after it boiled down to the understanding of what is going on. That changed me. I felt more connected. One thing that was different that [first] year was that I was invited to birthday parties…I went…It just added more depth [to my relationship with parents]. I did home visits; I haven't done them before. I went to one child's home, and there was no furniture. I had an extra bed, so I brought it over.

Teachers take cues from parents about the kind of personal contact they want. Third grade teacher Mrs. Amada Pérez would like to make a visit to each child's home.

> I've let the children know that I'd be happy to come if they invite me…I've made some home visits. I just sit and talk with the parents. I tell them if they can't come to the conference, I would come and do a home visit. Some parents have thanked me for offering…and they prefer a phone conversation. The parents' situation would be sad, and they don't want me to see it. And I know that because I would have died to have a teacher come to my home.

Mr. Giancarlo Mercado, a fourth grade teacher, has several students who are bussed in from a neighborhood across town because their local school is overcrowded. Therefore, he arranges to meet their parents at a school in their own neighborhood. He says,

> Bridging Cultures has re-emphasized to me bridging home and school, and when home is not adjacent to the school and the parents cannot get there [because of] lack of transportation, [needing to take care of] smaller children, and work....I go on my own initiative to the bussed-in school. I have coffee in the other community of my children. I do that two or three times a year.

Increased Ability to Take Parents' Perspectives

The first apparent change in each teacher's ability to take the perspective of parents was reflected in the answers on the post-assessment of cultural awareness. Enhanced ability in this domain is both an outcome and a cause. It began to develop early in the Project, led to changes in practice, which in turn led to greater ability to take parents' perspectives as teachers could see the impact on students and parents.

Kindergarten teacher Mrs. Kathryn Eyler has reflected on her dawning awareness that like her "diverse" students, she too, has a culture. She recalled an incident of a few years earlier:

> At one of my first parent conferences at Hoover kindergarten with a mother and her friend or sister—two women—I said to them, 'You are the first teacher of the child,' and I remember the two women looking at each other, and it landed with a thud! I thought I was being so wise, but they just went, 'What?' in a non-friendly way. They thought I was shirking my responsibility.

Mrs. Eyler is recognizing that different cultures may have different ideas about the roles teachers and parents should take. She says that one of her goals in participating in the Bridging Cultures Project "was [to be] related to parents in a better way; and I think I was always good, but it is much better now because I don't come to them like they are ignorant. [I'm not] patronizing."

In her monthly meetings with parents, Ms. Daley strives to show her respect for parents and their knowledge. "I work very hard at making sure that the parents don't see me as someone who is going to instruct them but as someone who wants to share and ask for their input on how the children are learning," she says. In response to an interview question about what she would tell other teachers is the most important change she has made in her practice or way of thinking, she commented, "Placing the judgments that I make with a better awareness of culture and behaviors—of value beliefs. I can get rid of the judgment and make more constructive choices in the classroom to make instruction more successful."

Likewise, Mr. Mercado says,

I understand them [families] better and am less judgmental and am definitely more empathetic or sympathetic to where they are coming from…as a result of the model [of individualism and collectivism]. Just decisions about why they are absent. 'We had to go to Tijuana because grandmother is sick.' Why they come to class with the whole family. I was open [before], but now I understand why [they do these things].

Designed New Classroom Practices

Once increased cultural awareness was awakened, new practices emerged. Elements of change, such as altered schedules and different approaches to parent conferences and parent volunteers, represent specific strategies that were influenced by what teachers were learning through their personal and informal interactions, as well as through ethnography (see Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001). Teachers recognized that in order to meet families halfway they would have to move beyond "typical practice."

Altered Schedules to Accommodate Families

Mrs. Hernandez's new schedule in school year 2000-2001 reduced her opportunities for informal contact with parents. One unfortunate change was that her designated lunch break now occupied a time slot she would normally have with families.

I have told parents that if they need to talk with me, they can come in,[during my lunch] and I'll step away and meet with them… It may be the only time they can meet me. They have to pick up other children. I don't tell them, 'Oh no, you've got to make an appointment.' I always make time to see them. (Trumbull Interview, July 11, 2001)

Mrs. Hernandez also altered the parent conference schedule in order to accommodate parents. "Teachers were expected to stay until 5:30 on the 'late conference day,' but I stayed until 7:00 because a lot of parents didn't get off work until 5:00. Then they would take the bus and get back to their neighborhood at around 6:00". Staying late allowed her to achieve a 90% turnout. There were four conference days, and she stayed late three of the four days. Says Mrs. Hernandez, "Some parents said they could come before work, at 7:00 a.m., so I would be there at 7:00" (Trumbull Interview, July 11, 2001).

Mrs. Hernandez noticed that many teachers wrote parents off, saying, "Oh, they don't care." But she is aware that parents have no other options. Mrs. Hernandez continues to provide as much flexibility as she can to ensure that parents come. "[W]ith conferences, I give them a wide selection of times they can choose from. I allot 30 minutes instead of 20 minutes… It doesn't take so

long after we know each other. First we have to get comfortable" (Trumbull Interview, July 11, 2001).

Teachers' willingness to give parents as much time as they need comes through in small bits of conversation threaded throughout the Bridging Cultures meetings and interviews. Ms. Daley at one time laughed about how her colleagues teased her about her 45-minute conferences. She also holds impromptu meetings with parents before and after school, another indicator of her openness to making herself available at parents' convenience. Mr. Mercado's flexibility in scheduling parent meetings is chronicled in the story about going across town to meet with parents of his bussed-in students.

Introduced New Forms of Parent-Teacher Conferences

Parent-teacher conferences came up as a topic early in Bridging Cultures discussions because fourth grade teacher Ms. Marie Altchech had been a subject in some earlier research on conferences (Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1998) and had been subsequently searching for a more successful format (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Altchech, 1999). After the Bridging Cultures workshops, Ms. Altchech started to think about how to use her knowledge of the individualism/collectivism framework to get parents more involved in the conference. It seemed to her that parents were not altogether comfortable with her individual conferences and didn't get much from them. "That's when the group conference idea came into my mind and when I started to think about it," she says. In Ms. Altchech's new version of the conference, small groups of five to eight parents meet at a time, with their children present. Ms. Altchech spends the first few minutes explaining things all parents need to know about testing, the report card, etc. She talks about what she is doing to help students progress and makes suggestions to parents about how they can help at home.

Ms. Altchech says she believes the parents have been empowered by the group conference process:

> Some of the parents are more actively involved in conferences now. Now they will ask questions, not just about behavior, but about how they can help their child. [I see] a change in the parents' role. That is the most evident change.

Other Bridging Cultures teachers have tried group conferences, and some, like Mrs. Pérez and Ms. Daley, are sold on the idea. Ms. Daley team teaches with three other teachers, and not only does she do group conferences, but all four teachers and four classroom assistants participate. "This reinforces the idea that we're a family here," she says (Trumbull, Field Notes, January 30, 1999). Although she offers individual conferences if parents desire, none has yet asked for one. Mrs. Pérez talks about the first time she conferenced with groups in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Mrs. Pérez's First Group Conferences.

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…I tried to do it by reading group, but my groups ended up being more mixed. The parents came after work, after picking strawberries. But it wasn't a problem to have mixed groups. I did set up a little corner for short individual conferences, and that worked out very well. The groups were [usually around] 8 parents, plus children and siblings and neighbors who had driven them…But the group could be as large as 12. Everyone sat in the circle: parents, siblings, everyone. For the very little ones, I set up math manipulatives to play with….

People wanted to talk about dreams for the future of their children. Even though I directed it, and specific things had to be accomplished, I still allowed time to share thoughts. Some people got emotional, and I wasn't sure what to do because I'm not into counseling. I handled it with empathy and then tried to move it into a positive direction…Other parents responded similarly [to the emotional statements], saying, "That is the same with me."

The personal content of the conferences and personal nature of the relationships among parents and between the parents and Mrs. Pérez are evident, even from this short description. Note that Mrs. Pérez also offers parents private time if they want it, as do the others who hold group conferences.

It is important for teachers to be able to interpret parents' verbal and nonverbal signals during conversations. (See Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001 for strategies to diagnose and repair communication problems across cultures, as well as more descriptions of parent-teacher conferences.) Not all parents from similar backgrounds will respond the same way to the same topics or teacher comments.

Tried New Approaches to Engaging Parent Volunteers

Increasing the number of parent volunteers is a goal of most teachers. Mrs. Hernandez, more than any other Bridging Cultures teacher, has systematically addressed the goal of engaging parent volunteers successfully. We have followed Mrs. Hernandez over a period of years and through two schools, as new realities interact with her own efforts. Early in the Bridging Cultures Project, Mrs. Hernandez decided she would transcend her fears of having parents observe her, and she began a campaign to entice parents to volunteer in her classroom—on whatever terms that would work for them. Figure 3 gives an abbreviated account of how she first went about the task of developing a group of volunteers. (Note that ethnography, discussed later, plays a strong role in her process.)

Figure 3. Developing a Cadre of Volunteers.

Both the parents and I had difficulty approaching each other for help. Most parents had little formal education and probably did not know how they could actually assist in the classroom; only a few had attended junior high or high school. I had to conduct my own informal ethnographic research about my families and began to build relationships with parents in the process.

Through simple conversations I had with some of them after school, I became aware of how much formal schooling they had. This gave me a good idea as to who could help my students to practice reading skills and who would rather assist putting materials together in the classroom or at home. As I became more familiar with my parents, I built a bridge between school culture, their culture, as well as my own. I started getting a better response regarding my call for volunteers.

Although I was now averaging five parent volunteers a week, I still felt like there was something missing. Many parents would stay but were uncomfortable [interrupting me] while I was teaching a lesson and ask what they could do…[When they had finished a task] they would sit and wait until reading time came. During my conferencing in November, I showed my parents a folder I compiled. In this folder I included a paragraph about how much I needed them to help their children achieve different academic goals. I developed a specific schedule, including days and times. I told them they were very welcome to bring younger siblings and emphasized how being in the classroom may help them (the younger siblings) when they were actually in school later on.

(Excerpted from Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001, pp. 85-86)

As a result of this process, Mrs. Hernandez succeeded in getting 12 regular parent volunteers from the 17 families represented in her classroom, whom she matched to specific tasks that were geared to their level of skills. She also posted a folder, titled "Volunteers," in the classroom that had a page for each parent with a listing of the activities he or she could do as well as other tasks that might attract other parents who happened to look in the folder. At the request of teachers of native English-speaking children, Mrs. Hernandez translated her parent folder into English so that they could use it. In the 1999-2000 school year, Mrs. Hernandez's school recorded that 25 volunteers had each put in over 100 hours; ten of these were from her classroom.

Explored New Roles

Teachers and parents have particular roles with which they are comfortable, roles that are implicitly expected of them but that can vary from culture to culture (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Bridging Cultures teachers' willingness to forge more personal relationships with parents represents a modification of the usual role of the teacher. So did their engagement in ethnography and more conscious advocacy. As teachers

explored new roles for themselves, they also began to discover that they could find ways to support parents to take on roles with which they may have previously been uncomfortable.

Became Ethnographers

Ethnography, according to Fetterman (1988), is "the art and science of describing a group or culture" (p. 11). Staff researchers on the Bridging Cultures Project encouraged teachers to act as ethnographers of their students' families and communities. This meant making a more conscious effort to do something they were already doing informally: learning from families about their daily lives, their histories, and their goals for their children through conversation and participation in joint activities. It meant taking on the role of learner rather than educator. Teachers found that they developed deeper respect for parents when they listened in a non-judgmental fashion, without the expectation that they would be giving expert advice.

Conducting Group Ethnography. In school year 2001-2002, Mrs. Hernandez tried a new strategy to get to know her families. Because she was in a new community where parents were rarely available during the school day, she realized that it could take weeks or months to learn individually about each family. So at the beginning of the year, during kindergarten orientation, she took the half hour she had with her parent group (after a whole-group orientation in the cafeteria) to develop an "ethnography chart." Whenever possible in the coming months she would build more personal ethnographic knowledge of families through conferences or small encounters.

Mrs. Hernandez distributed post-it notes and asked parents to put one next to each question to which they could respond "yes". She asked them to write only their name and their child's name on each post-it so she would have a record of who answered in what way. She knew that some parents were not literate, particularly in English, but she expected that they would be able to write their own and their child's name. She had seven questions posted on large chart paper in Spanish, which she read aloud in turn:

Figure 4. Mrs. Hernandez's Group Ethnography.

Questions:
1. Is this your first child in school?
2. Do you have any other children at our school?
3. Do you read or write in English?
4. Do you read or write in Spanish?
5. Is there anybody to help with English homework at home?
6. Do you work in or out of your home?
7. Would you like to volunteer in our class?

Mrs. Hernandez thought that the group orientation of the activity would be harmonious for the parents, who were all Latino and mostly immigrants, that they would perhaps be more likely to feel comfortable answering some questions in the group than being put on the spot individually. Their participation seemed to bear out her assumptions. She was able to use the resulting graph to make some decisions about how to work with the families represented and target additional information she needed.

Adopting a Non-judgmental Stance. Mrs. Eyler was at first embarrassed by the degree to which she had made judgments about parents' ways of child-rearing. But as she learned about different cultural perspectives, she rapidly achieved a non-judgmental stance toward parents that allowed her to work much more closely and successfully with them, including eliciting their participation in solving problems. She observed,

> This may be a small example of change, but I have noticed that I am taking a new tone with parents. When you say, 'We've got a problem; we need help' versus 'You need to do this' (whatever it is), they will absolutely help. In our group conferences, we talked about how we have to help each other. I will ask them with regard to a problem, 'What do you think?' It seems to make all the difference in the world (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001, p. 108).

Such a change in stance is not trivial. It is arguably one of the most important changes a teacher could make.

Became More Effective Advocates for Students and Families

Mr. Mercado described his experience with a set of problems in his school that affected parents' involvement. For security reasons, the district implemented a lock-down policy. Schools would be locked, and anyone who wanted to gain entrance to them would need an appointment and personal identification. The district also banned baby strollers from all schools—from the buildings as well as the schoolyard. "Mothers with infants would [now] have to find someone to care for their baby or park the stroller and get a chain to secure it—which is another hindrance for parent participation." To make matters worse, teachers and parents were engaged in a battle over parking spaces, which were at a premium in the main lot. Teachers arriving on the late side would find the lot full; they identified the problem as attributable to parents parking in what should be their spaces. A couple of the teachers began putting flyers on offending parents' cars, saying, "Do not park in our parking lot."

All of these factors added up to a very unwelcoming approach to parents. As Mr. Mercado said,

We don't want to discourage them from coming to school… We complain that parents don't come to school… but we have been sending these [negative] messages out. Parents were, in fact, extremely upset and came in as a group to meet with the principal. I urged the principal to explain to the parents why this [the policy] was happening and explain to staff why they [parents] were acting this way.

According to Mr. Mercado, "It was a very hostile meeting, with parents saying, 'How dare you lock us out from where our children are all day?'" No one had told them why the district had mandated the lockdown or the stroller policy. Once the principal explained the reason for the policy, with the help of a translator, understanding took the place of mistrust and anger. Because the principal knew of Mr. Mercado's involvement with Bridging Cultures, she prevailed upon him to explain the situation to the faculty in a short after-school presentation.

Mr. Mercado has frequently found himself in the position of "cultural broker," trying to sensitively explain to colleagues why a conflict might be occurring. A kindergarten teacher in his school complained that too many parents were going in and out of her room. They were interfering with her ability to teach, and they "needed to cut the [apron] strings." Mr. Mercado's interpretation of the Latino parents' behavior as based in their strong cultural values of helping and maintaining family connections resulted in the teacher's becoming less angry and "maybe more sympathetic. She couldn't allow them in, but she greeted them with less anger and made them feel less unwanted." On another occasion, Mr. Mercado ventured an explanation for parents' preference to voice their concerns *en masse* rather than individually to the principal as a combination of respect for authority and their natural group orientation.

Explained School Culture to Parents

Bridging Cultures teachers believe that parents can benefit from an understanding of the dominant culture reflected in schooling practices and how that culture may differ from their home cultures. As a result of their increased awareness of the potential conflicts between home and school cultures, teachers began to talk with parents more explicitly about school practices and policies and the rationales for them in cultural terms. Some went so far as to hold formal training sessions for parents. Teachers also believe that parents need to meet the school halfway and that students need to acquire a dual cultural perspective, and the ability to function in the cultures of both school and home.

Says Mrs. Hernandez:

I've come to think that I want to help the parents … learn more about what is expected of them and their children in society here in the

United States. I want them to know that I accept them and I came from the same roots they did. We're immigrants. For a while we didn't have legal status here. We share that. I want their children to be bilingual. Let's get them a good base in English. I want the parents to know what the reality is. They have to learn English. … basically a little bit of how society works and what's expected of them.

Ms. Daley says, "We have a right to not negate their culture but also not to negate the American culture that their parents want them exposed to as well. So neither should be negated. Both should be accepted and explored" (Videotape, Fall 1996). As they discuss the topic of culture with them, teachers communicate to parents this perspective of the need for students to have bicultural skills. In school year 2002-2003, Ms. Daley was part of a small experimental research project based at her school. She and the other three second grade teachers with whom she team teaches organized professional development workshops for the parents to help them understand the expectations of the school and learn how they could support their children and help them succeed. Two groups received "Bridging Cultures training" based on the individualism/collectivism framework, and two received standard parent training. Results of this experiment are now being analyzed.

Supported Parents in Taking on New Roles

Much of the literature on involving Latino immigrant parents suggests that they may not believe it is their role to help their children with academic tasks at home, but that it is the teacher's job to teach and their job to parent (Valdés, 1996). In keeping with a belief that social/moral development is part and parcel of intellectual development, they may also expect the teacher to take a hand in fostering moral rectitude (Dyson, with the San Francisco East Bay Teacher Study Group, 1997; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995). Some research has shown that given activities that make sense to them and an appropriate appeal to their value of "helpfulness" (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Ramirez, 2001; Reese, 2002), parents will become open to taking on new roles, such as assisting their children with academic tasks.

All teachers expressed at one time or another their belief that their students' achievement could be enhanced by direct parental support, and they identified different ways to go about eliciting that support. Mrs. Hernandez has shown small groups of parents how to do early literacy activities:

Last year [2001-2002] I had a group of parents that I had met with individually, but their kids were at the same [low skills] level; and we'd meet and make materials so they could practice at home with their children. They all came—five of them. They came and made individual

flash cards for their kids. I could have easily run them off and cut them for them, but I got greater participation from them this way. And they got a chance to see that other children had the same need…It eased the fact that their children were having such a challenge with the reading program, and I didn't have to explain the same thing five different times! (Trumbull Interview, March, 12, 2002).

Mrs. Hernandez also met with the parents and explained the school holiday homework:

Before Christmas, I explained the homework that would go home. Out of 21 students, probably 18 parents came in, and I got 16 packets back completed from Christmas. Parents knew how important that was, and they got children to complete them (Trumbull Interview, July 11, 2001).

Quite likely because of the personal relationship Mrs. Hernandez has with parents and family members, they are more comfortable edging into new domains. Mrs. Hernandez also gauges what each parent is willing and able to do and provides very explicit directions.

Ms. Saitzyk, bolstered by a desire to work more closely with parents as a result of the initial workshops, approached them to help with their children's reading development.

…I really got all the parents involved in the reading homework. I talked to each parent individually about the need for them to listen to their child read. I got that cooperation. I sent home a reading folder every night. I first sat down with each parent and explained how I wanted them to listen to their child read and to keep a log of the book and write down how many minutes the child read. It was like a mini script [for them]…[The] most important homework was to read a little book that I sent home. The book went home and came back the same day—[and it required] total cooperation with the family. Even for the ones that didn't understand, they did listen to their children.

Ms. Saitzyk believes that her first graders' high achievement on the standardized tests at the end of the school year is attributable to the cooperation between herself and the parents: "…[O]ur May testing was excellent. My students, tested in Spanish, as a class scored way above average on overall reading. Their mathematics scores were equally high" (Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, et al., 2001). She noted that her students' scores, on average at the 85th percentile, were much higher than those of their peers in other classes.

Discussion

Prescriptions for parent involvement from a single cultural perspective are likely to fall short of engaging parents in the most meaningful ways, to perpetuate the power differential between dominant and "minority" communities, and to ultimately foreclose the kind of involvement schools seek. Although socioeconomic class and language differences are sometimes considered by schools as barriers to parent involvement—and they may make various efforts to address them—it seems that only rarely do schools attempt to understand the values and personal histories that also influence home-school relationships for both children and adults. The results of this research collaboration show that with some professional development on cultural value systems, committed teachers can take important steps to understand families and bring about deepened relationships with parents, greater parent involvement in schooling, and positive effects on students.

Impact of Economic Context

Although we have focused on culture, it must be acknowledged that parents' ability to participate in volunteer activities at the school site and opportunities for teacher-parent interactions are clearly affected by economic factors apart from culture. Mrs. Hernandez's own experience is illustrative. On the surface, the two schools she has taught in bear considerable resemblance to each other. Both are relatively large elementary schools located in the Los Angeles area and have very large Latino populations. Neither is in an affluent area; physically they are quite similar. Yet there is just enough difference in the economic context of the two schools to make a huge difference in the presence of parents at the school sites. Most parents in the neighborhood of the new school work and are not available during the day at all, unlike many of the mothers in the neighborhood of the previous school.

Of course, education level and socioeconomic status are correlated. At her new school, the parents of Mrs. Hernandez's students in 2001-2002 had a relatively low level of formal education; 5 out of 20 were illiterate. Therefore, the academic support they could offer was limited; notably, however, Mrs. Hernandez maximized the possibilities.

Impact of Local and State Policies on Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is affected not only by local factors like economics and teachers' skills in crossing cultural boundaries; it is also influenced by external factors such as districtwide or statewide policies.

Mandated Reading Program: Open Court Closes Doors

When curriculum changes, the opportunities for parent participation may change. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) now mandates that teachers use the Open Court reading program (SRA/McGraw-Hill, 2001). The regimented way in which the program is being implemented makes parent involvement during language arts time difficult. Many of the activities that parents could easily volunteer to help with are now non-existent in LAUSD classrooms, and there is no training for parents on how to do the required activities. The upshot of the district adoption of Open Court is that Mrs. Hernandez has less flexibility for including parents as part of her instructional program. Mrs. Hernandez reflected,

> I did not really have any parent volunteers who could carry out the Open Court [reading program] activities in the classroom for children who were falling behind. I also had parents who all worked…. I had two parents who spoke English but worked full–time. This year [2000-2001] I had one parent volunteer, the community liaison who ran the parent advisory group and parents' center (Trumbull Interview, July 11, 2001).

She hopes to find ways to include the few parents who are available in her current school, but this will require further adjustments to the new reading program.

Proposition 227: Curtailing Bilingual Education in California

Proposition 227, now law in California, severely restricts the ways in which students' home languages can be used in the classroom. Whereas 29% of English language learners were participating in bilingual education programs before 1997, now only 9% are (California Department of Education, 2003). In 1996 when the Bridging Cultures Program began, all seven of the teacher-researchers were teaching Spanish-English bilingual classrooms. At this time, only one teacher, Mrs. Pérez, teaches bilingually, as a result of the actions of parents in her community to preserve a program they value. The end of bilingual education, as many teachers view it, has affected the ways volunteers who speak languages other than English might participate in the classroom.

Mrs. Hernandez says,

> Before, many parents were able to use the materials in my class and read to their children or other students. They were even able to conduct small reading groups because the reading was done in Spanish. With the end of bilingual education, this is no longer an option. I had to take on all the reading and push students to practice on their own with little or no help. However, I saw this as an opportunity to explain

to the parents how being politically involved and being accounted for affected their children's lives. Some of the parents were citizens, and they did not vote—and they regretted it afterwards.

She still sends home books in Spanish and encourages parents to read them with their children. But an essential connection between home and school has been weakened.

Final Thoughts

This research, jointly conducted by staff researchers and teacher researchers over a period of more than six years, produced a great number of examples of innovations that resulted in positive relationships between home and school. The examples illustrate the point that increasing parent involvement is not just about teaching parents skills or getting parents into the school to participate in predetermined ways. Success with parents from these Latino immigrant communities is predicated on cross-cultural understanding and openness to hearing how parents want to participate.

The Bridging Cultures Project is based on the belief that all cultural communities have "funds of knowledge" that can be tapped by schools to the benefit of students (Moll, 1992). Studies show that immigrant Latino parents have "widely variable understanding of the U.S. educational system" (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001, p. 580). Therefore, teachers like those in the Bridging Cultures Project can play an important role in helping such parents understand the culture of schooling and the expectations schools will hold for their children.

Given the opportunity, Latino immigrant parents and other parents will come forward to support teachers in whatever ways they can. Schools must get beyond the tacit belief that those parents who are already involved in volunteer activities or serving on the PTA are the "knowledgeable" ones (Finders & Lewis, 1994). For educators to be more successful with "minority" students, they must "connect with families and identify their needs in a respectful and nonjudgmental way" (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001, p. 279).

The current research reported here shows ways to promote parent inclusion in a particular sociocultural context. Of course, these strategies will not apply to all "minority" parents or even all Latino immigrant parents, but they suggest possibilities that others may want to investigate. The teachers' accounts are a poignant reminder of the human face of schooling: There is no substitute for teachers' and parents' getting to know each other. But if school personnel are to develop cross-cultural understanding with families as a basis for making schools

more inclusive, they need tools for learning about culture. The outcomes of the project have shown that the individualism/collectivism framework can be a powerful heuristic for understanding some of the most important cultural differences between schools and Latino immigrant families.

Endnotes

[1] The term "minority" is unsatisfactory on many counts. It risks suggesting "less important;" in many cases, the group designated "minority" is actually in the majority in the given setting. Nevertheless, it is the term used in much of the relevant literature and is simpler than "nondominant cultural group" or "historically underserved communities," terms that might be preferable. Our compromise is to use the term "minority" and keep it within quotation marks.

[2] The seven participating teachers are Ms. Marie Altchech, Stoner Avenue Elementary School, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD); Ms. Catherine Daley, Magnolia Elementary School, LAUSD; Mrs. Kathryn Eyler, Hoover Elementary School, LAUSD; Mrs. Elvia Hernandez, Griffin Elementary School, LAUSD (formerly of Ada S. Nelson Elementary School, Los Nietos School District, Whittier, CA); Mr. Giancarlo Mercado, Westminster Avenue Elementary School, LAUSD; Mrs. Amada Pérez, Mar Vista Elementary School, Ocean View District, Oxnard, CA; and Ms. Pearl Saitzyk, Westminster Avenue Elementary School, LAUSD.

[3] On the whole, it seemed that teachers might be freer to discuss their concerns and explore new options if they were not from the same school. Also, variations in environment might bring a wider range of observations and opportunities for teachers to learn from each other.

[4] The staff researchers are Patricia M. Greenfield, Department of Psychology, University of California at Los Angeles; Blanca Quiroz, Harvard Graduate School of Education (doctoral student, formerly at UCLA); Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, Michael D. Eisner College of Education, California State University, Northridge; and Elise Trumbull, Culture and Language in Education Program, WestEd, Oakland, CA.

[5] Teachers' full names are used throughout the Bridging Cultures publications, since they are not "subjects" but full partners in the work. Several have co-authored articles with the staff researchers.

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Elise Trumbull is a senior research associate with the Culture and Language in Education Program at WestEd, the regional educational laboratory based in San Francisco. A former teacher and assessment specialist for an elementary school district, since 1996 she has been Director of the Bridging Cultures Project, a collaborative action teacher research project focused on improving the education of ethnolinguistic minority students.

Carrie Rothstein-Fisch is currently an assistant professor in the Michael D. Eisner College of Education at California State University, Northridge, where she earned the Distinguished Teaching Award. She is one of the four original researchers on the Bridging Cultures Project, and author of several texts related to the project.

Mrs. Elvia Hernandez has taught primary grades in the Los Angeles area for twelve years. Bilingual in English and Spanish, Mrs. Hernandez is currently a Kindergarten teacher at Griffin Elementary School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Her own experience moving between two cultures is invaluable in helping parents and children new to U.S. schools make their own transitions.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the first author at: Elise Trumbull, WestEd, 300 Lakeside Dr., 18th Floor, Oakland, CA 04611