Communicating with Families Across Cultures: An Investigation of Teacher Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract

Increasing diversity in the student population intensifies the need for and the difficulties of establishing culturally sensitive and meaningful communication between teachers and parents. This study examined the practices of early childhood and elementary teachers concerning culturally sensitive home-school communication. As a second phase of a multi-phase research design, focus group discussions were conducted with 21 participants. Discussions centered on the teachers' understanding of familial influences on learning and their actual communication patterns with parents. Seven themes were identified related to such issues as: defining culture; exploring the relationship between culture, class, and child-rearing; recognizing one's own biases; and reaching out to parents in a culturally sensitive manner. Implications for educators working with families from diverse cultures are discussed.

Key Words: home-school communication, culturally responsive teaching, focus groups, teacher-parent relationship

Introduction

"Their culture is what they learn at home."

"The labels are supposed to make things easier, but they don't. They make it much more difficult."

"There are cultures within cultures because of different wants and needs individuals may have for themselves. They may act different from the way that they were taught within their culture. They may want to step outside of their culture."

Scholars today recognize that culture is influenced by variables such as historical and social contexts, geographic location, gender, age, and generation, as well as ethnicity, cultural community, and race (Greenfield, 1994; Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). The educators quoted above are struggling to understand this intricate construct in the context of their own classrooms. They are doing so because as teachers in New Jersey, with a large multiethnic population, they are challenged daily with building relationships across cultural boundaries. They are, in Lisa Delpit's words, teaching "other people's children" (1995).

Research in the field of home-school relations recognizes that children are educated in the home and the community as well as in the school; therefore, open and trusting communication between teachers and parents is critical (Dodd & Konzal, 2002). When faced with the challenge of working with families from cultures different from their own, teachers must work especially hard to avoid misunderstandings based in cultural differences. When families and educators can communicate openly, there is a better chance that this will lead to increased social capital, which then leads to common understandings and expectations about the best ways to help children learn. This, in turn, leads to better student outcomes (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Additionally, the literature shows that when parents understand the school culture and provide at-home experiences to support school expectations, children learn more (Henderson & Berla, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Close relationships between families and educators are built on mutual trust and respect. Developing such a relationship is difficult under any circumstances; it is even more problematic to establish when parents and teachers come from different backgrounds. However, open, honest, and reciprocal cultural exchanges can take place when educators assume their professional responsibility to reach out to parents in thoughtful and respectful ways. Doing so helps both parents and teachers understand each other's values and beliefs so that each can create learning environments, at home and at school respectively, that recognize the knowledge and practices of the other system. Research conducted by Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez (2003) reiterates the importance of teachers understanding and respecting the orientations of the families in order to support students' learning.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The broad foundation for the study is the ecological framework as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986), which identifies multiple interlocking and nested variables that influence the development of children. Based on this framework, in the present study, families and schools are conceptualized as components of the microsystem, the relationship between the family and school comprise the mesosystem, and cultural notions of development form the macrosystem. Children are raised within this overlapping set of systems, and therefore open communication between the mesolinks is imperative if children are to grow and learn. Other theorists also argue for the importance of teachers and educators actively listening to each other in order for each to gain understandings of the different systems that affect the child (Atkin & Bastiani, 1988; Dodd & Konzal, 2002; Sarason, 1995; Thompson, 2003); in Bronfenbrenner's words, the scholars emphasize the need to strengthen the mesolink between the microsytstems of home and school. Atkin and Bastiani argue that "listening to parents…needs to be seen as a crucial element in any attempt to improve home/school relations.…It can make schools aware of the families of their pupils and of the communities in which they are located" (p. 18). In their concluding chapter, Dodd and Konzal (2002) argue that "since no one knows everything or has all the answers, everyone needs to work together to find better ways to educate children. And everyone has knowledge to contribute to this ongoing process" (p. 290).

Additionally, the model of "developmental niche" articulated by Super and Harkness (1997, 2002) helps to frame the current study. This model conceptualizes development of children in a cultural context where the parents' (or caregivers') beliefs about child-rearing and development, or ethnotheories, are seen as the pathway through which development is fostered. Development is conceptualized as operating within the subsystems of the physical and social settings, the culture and customs of child-rearing, and the caretakers' ethnotheories which are shared by the community. In the current study, we examine the extent to which teachers, as constituents of the child's community, understand and share the parents' culturally embedded ethnotheories.

Therefore, the current study draws upon and expands on the work in the field of developmental psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Super & Harkness, 1997, 2002) to explain the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1991) and extends that argument to culturally responsive family involvement practices. Open communication, trust, high expectations, and non-judgmental exchanges of cultural values, beliefs, and practices are as important for effective communication with parents as they are for effective classroom curriculum and interactions.

Extant review of the literature reveals core themes that guided the present study: As researchers, we know about the importance of parent-teacher communication (Ames, 1993; Dodd & Konzal, 2002; Epstein, 2001; Helling, 1996); about barriers for such communication, especially as it relates to cross-cultural communication (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996; Dodd & Konzal, 1999, 2002; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000); and about how to translate understandings of culture into practices that assure open parent-teacher communication and culturally responsive instructional practices (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1991; Trumbull et al., 2003). We also know that in order to have effective communication with parents, it becomes necessary to understand the frameworks within which they function (Caspe, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Culture (Weisner, 1998) and economic factors (Greenfield, 1994; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001) influence these frameworks. Therefore, it becomes the school's responsibility to help build bridges between the cultures of the children, their families, and other communities by respecting their diversity (Trumbull et al., 2003; Wright & Stegelin, 2003). However, many teachers often do not have much understanding of the families' cultural pathways and do not know how to build these bridges in their classrooms (e.g., Gonzalez-Mena, 2000), even though many scholars in the field have identified the need for culturally responsive teaching (Caspe; Delpit; Gay; Ladson-Billings; Marion, 1980; Trumbull et al., 2001; Voltz, 1994). In addition, as we extend this argument to explicitly focus on family-school relationships, we argue that culturally responsive teaching includes reaching out to parents to learn from them. In order to do this, teachers must consider and be open to accepting the cultural frameworks of families different from their own in order to establish open, frank, and ongoing communication with them.

Purpose of the Study

Many teachers have expressed their frustration to us at their inability to communicate effectively with families from cultures different from their own. We, too, understand this frustration. Each of the current authors has struggled with communicating across cultural differences in our work with families. Two of us are European Americans and the third is Asian Indian. We each have taught children from families with backgrounds different from our own. We know that building positive relationships with parents from different backgrounds takes effort and patience. Therefore, based on our own experiences as well as on the frustrations we have heard from teachers, the ultimate goal of this research project is to design professional development programs for

teachers to help them develop skills necessary for cross-cultural communication with parents.

The current study is the second of a multi-phase project examining teachers' knowledge and practices in working with families from diverse cultures. In phase one, surveys were collected from practicing teachers, specialists, and administrators in public and private schools serving children from preschool to fifth grade. The survey had two main sections: (1) parental involvement, and (2) knowledge of culture and its impact upon a child's education (see Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2005; Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2004). The findings highlighted the discrepancies between the teachers' beliefs and practices. Teachers identified the parents' role as being supportive of the school practices and educational efforts of the children. However, they did not place importance on parental classroom participation, curriculum implementation discussions, or regular parent-initiated teacher meetings. Teachers appeared to seek overt support from parents, implying a unidirectional teacher-parent relationship rather than one that encouraged a two-way interchange of knowledge about the child. Findings also suggested that there was a disparity between teacher beliefs and practices related to their understanding of culture. For instance, teachers felt the least important components needed to understand a culture were the overt aspects of the culture, such as food, art, celebrations, artifacts, and dress, and that these were also the least influential on children's learning. However, at the same time, they stated that these were the very aspects they were most aware of and used most often in their classrooms. The teachers, therefore, were seemingly unaware of the disparity between their beliefs and practices (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005).

Because of these and other discrepancies found in phase one, focus groups were formed in an effort to understand, clarify, and probe issues that arose as a result of responses given on the survey. This article reports on the results of the second phase of our research using focus groups. Planned future phases include surveys and interviews with parents in order to understand the issues from their perspective, and the development and implementation of a series of teacher workshops based on needs identified in previous phases.

Methods

Based on the findings of Phase I, we decided it was necessary to further probe participants' responses in order to contextualize their knowledge and practices. Toward this end, we developed a protocol and conducted two focus groups with different populations of teachers. Focus groups are recognized by qualitative research theorists as appropriate methodology for probing data

collected through surveys (e.g., Morgan, 1988; Patton, 1990). According to Morgan, "At the later stages of a survey, when the data are in and the analysis begins, focus groups can serve as a follow-up data collection, pursuing 'exploratory' aspects of the analysis. This is especially important when the results are puzzling to the researchers" (p. 35).

Participants and Procedure

Focus group participants are typically "relatively homogenous" (Patton, 1990, p. 335) and from "theoretically chosen subgroups from the total population" who can "provide the most meaningful information" (Morgan, 1988, p. 45). Our two focus groups met these criteria. Participants were practicing teachers, specialists, and administrators in public and private schools serving children from preschool to fifth grade. One focus group (a total of 10 participants) consisted of a group of teachers from a local elementary school. All but one (who was Asian) were European American. The second focus group (a total of 11 participants) consisted of a group of teachers or teacher-candidates who were working in preschools that were state funded and who were enrolled in a graduate class at a local college. This group of 11 was more diverse than the first group and included 7 European Americans, 2 African Americans, 1 Hispanic/Latino, and 1 West Indian. All the participants were female. In terms of the position the participants held, 14 were teachers, 2 were assistant teachers, 2 were specialists, 1 was an administrator, and 2 were not practicing teachers, but worked with children in non-teaching positions.

Focus Group Protocol

Using suggestions from Morgan (1988) for moderate moderator involvement, we developed an interview protocol to probe the issues that arose as a result of the findings on the surveys in Phase I. A total of 10 lead questions were developed which revolved around four main themes: ways in which family values and beliefs impact learning; ways of communicating with and involving parents from diverse cultures; specific questions participants would like to ask parents about their cultural practices; and specific needs for professional development in working with parents from diverse cultures. In the process of conducting the focus groups, additional themes emerged based on the discussion at hand, and these were subsequently probed.

A weakness of focus groups is that taking notes during a focus group can be difficult. Therefore, Patton (1990) suggests that two people facilitate the group and that the discussion be tape-recorded. Following this advice, our focus group discussions were tape-recorded. Additionally, one member of the research team took detailed notes of the conversation in each of the two focus group sessions

while the other two facilitated the discussion. A research assistant transcribed the tapes, and the transcription was compared with the detailed notes in order to clarify any areas of doubt. Using Guba's (1978, as cited in Patton) naturalistic qualitative data analysis process for identifying categories for analysis, we sought to identify a way to classify the data. We each coded the transcripts independent of one another, compared our coding, and decided upon a final coding system. This produced a series of themes that expanded upon issues raised during Phase I of this study and introduced additional issues revealed by the process.

Focus group results are not generalizable, nor are they meant to test hypotheses. The goal, rather, is to learn about the perspectives and experiences of a group of people who may be representative of a larger group (Morgan, 1988). Recognizing this, we used these focus group results to create a readers' theater script to be used to generate discussion among other teacher populations. We expect that this script will raise questions and provoke audience members to probe their own experiences and perspectives about the issues raised.

The transcripts from one focus group were edited and cut and pasted into a readers' theater script in order to highlight the themes. After constructing the script with the excerpts from one transcript, we filled in the script with excerpts from the second transcript in order to make sure that each theme was well developed. Since the tape-recording from which the transcripts were made did not catch all the conversation clearly, some editorial decisions were made in order to make sense of the transcripts. These decisions were based on the handwritten notes of the meetings and the memories of the three researchers. Other portions were edited for redundancy and language flow. While we realize that, as with any interpretation of research results, our interpretation may be colored by our own biases, we tried to remain true to the intent of the speakers. The six cast members are composites of members of the two groups. The use of readers' theater as a way of interpreting research results is now accepted practice within the qualitative research community (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995). Konzal (2001) argues:

> Readers' theater is a form of theater where scripts are read by actors with a minimum of costuming and staging. It is strongly influenced by the German playwright, Berholt Brecht's approach to theater – an approach that engages the audience in societal issues and that seeks to move the audience to action. As such, it raises questions, points out contradictions and provokes dialogue. Researchers who use this as a way of representing their research findings do so to bring their research findings more directly to their audience and to actively involve them in thinking about the issues addressed. (p. 102)

We see the use of readers' theater as a way of not only presenting our research findings in academic arenas, but also as a vehicle for professional development for preservice and practicing teachers.

Limitations of the Study

The limited number of participants in this study as well as the focus group methodology prevent any of the findings from being used to generalize conclusions. However, this was not the intent of this study. The intent was to probe inconsistencies in our survey data and to develop a readers' theater script that could be used as a professional development tool to provoke discussion of difficult issues related to cross-cultural teacher-parent interactions.

Another limitation of the study was that two of the researchers were of European American descent and the third of Asian Indian descent. While we each have worked with families different from our own, we typically represented a privileged group, while many of the families we worked with were not from privileged groups. This clearly limited our perspectives as we analyzed the data. As Trumbull et al. (2003) point out, it is important for educators to examine their own personal histories as they attempt to communicate across cultures. This, too, must be the case of researchers. However, since completing the readers' theater script, we have presented it at two professional conferences, each to diverse audiences. In each case the issues presented seemed to resonate with the audience members and an in-depth and charged discussion ensued allowing participants to examine their own personal histories and experiences.

Results

Seven common themes emerged through analysis of the transcripts: (1) defining culture is not as easy as we thought; (2) this is what we think we know about different cultures; (3) culture, class, and child-rearing; (4) which is more important: cultural influences or family influences? (5) getting to know my biases…and getting beyond them; (6) reaching out to parents from different cultures; and (7) help us to reach out to parents in a culturally sensitive way. The readers' theater script we developed illuminates all seven themes. The script's cast is comprised of composite characters representing the voices of similar participants (character names are pseudonyms). They are Maria (Puerto Rican), Harriet (African American), Janice (European American), Barbara (European American), and Su (Asian). The following section summarizes the themes and provides excerpts from the readers' theater script.

(1) Defining culture is not as easy as we thought: As teachers deliberated over the nuances of culture, they realized that they could not make any

generalizations about a person's culture based solely on their race or ethnicity. Culture emerged as a complex construction that is contextually based in time, place, and experience.

Harriet: There are cultures within cultures because of different wants and needs individuals may have for themselves. They may act different from the way that they were taught within their culture. They may want to step outside of their culture.

Janice: The labels are supposed to make things easier, but they don't. They make it much more difficult.

(2) This is what we think we know about different cultures: There were three threads that emerged within the theme. One thread focused on attempting to make generalizations about differences between cultures. The second thread found the participants attempting to find similarities across cultures. And a third thread exposed unexamined biases.

Barbara: I think in certain cultures education for girls is not valued as much as it is for boys. The boys seem to be very catered to, so getting them to be independent learners and to do their homework by themselves is very difficult. Some cultures don't put that much value on education.

Janice: I think as far as discipline values go, with African Americans who have been here for generations, as opposed to African Americans who have been here for just one generation…I found harsh discipline in both. The value of education…seems more predominant in the first generation African American culture…. I know that the Chinese, Polish, Russian, Indian parents really emphasize learning. You have to get very good grades in school.

Barbara: A lot of my parents were very young and when their son's having problems, "whap," before I knew it there was discipline on the spot… they're always hit, they're always in trouble…

Janice: There's a lot of variety in terms of upbringing. Some kids have a bedtime, some kids, "Whenever I feel like it, whenever my eyes close… that's my bedtime."

Maria: We give our babies coffee because coffee to us is a dessert, it isn't a caffeine drink that you shouldn't give to children. Kids drink coffee right in their bottle because it's a dessert to us. It's like a coca-cola. People say "Oh, that's terrible." But that's a judgment call. You're judging who I am, and I'm a bad Mother because I give my child coffee and, yes, they're running around, but in the island, days are longer, children are outside all the time, and they need all that energy to burn it up. Here in the city

when it gets cold, the house ends up driving us crazy. It's really different; it's a very different way of life here in the United States.

Maria: Dominican children are more protected. If you are a Dominican mother and there is a figurine on the table, you take the figurine away; you clear the area so the child can be a child. A Puerto Rican mother would say, "Touch it and die. Ok? You don't touch that." "Why?" "Because I said so." And the child will know. You say, "Don't do that." And they go, "Uh-huh." The mother doesn't clear the way. A lot of Caribbean women will clear the way. It's the child's time to be a child so the figurine has to go away. Then when the child is older, the figurine can come back.

(3) Culture, class, and child-rearing: Their detailed in-depth discussion on culture and child-rearing practices led to an awareness that it was difficult to tease apart the relationship of class and culture.

Janice: Some parents had time to come to conferences – had time to answer phone calls. They were there. With other parents we find five disconnected phone numbers; nobody returns your calls, nobody showing up for conferences. And then we have the ones that just don't care. They don't send their kids in with snack sometimes. So it all depends…on the parents. How much the parent pushes them at home.

Su: And that doesn't necessarily mean that she doesn't care. Maybe I don't see that parent, and it's very easy for me to jump to conclusions. She doesn't come to the teacher's conference. She doesn't care. She doesn't return my phone calls, but she's making some really hard choices. She's thinking about putting meat on the table which is really a basic need and without basic needs you can't really do much for your children.

Harriet: I think there's…a whole new culture.

(4) Which is more important: Cultural influences or family influences? Once again the struggle to further dissect cultural influences continued; however, the focus began to shift towards familial variations within cultures.

Maria: Getting back to your question about the individual kids and individual cultures, I think you can only use the individual cultures as a foundation, a history, to get us to look deeper at an individual child. You can have Puerto Ricans who grew up on the island of Puerto Rico who are really different than those who were raised here. I was raised here. I think for all intents and purposes I'm more American than anything. But there are a lot of things – my emotions are very Puerto Rican and my raising of my children is very Puerto Rican. But the way I come home and the way I work and the way I interact with my husband is very

American. I have fused the parts of the two cultures. I have meshed them together in some salad that I put together. So looking at that individual family is more important. Thank God my doctor doesn't use my chart to go look at some other patient. He looks at my history and my needs and my medical history before he diagnoses, before he prescribes. And that's the same thing with teachers. I think in order to understand a child as an individual, you need to understand where they're coming from and what their background is. You can't fully understand that child and how they're going to learn and ways that they can learn unless you understand their culture and where their family is from and where they're coming from.

Barbara: I think you have to look at the individual child.

(5) Getting to know my biases…and getting beyond them: As noted earlier, there were distinct differences in the dialogue and dynamics within the two focus groups. The group that was more diverse found that it was easy to misinterpret each other's meanings. This led to tense moments. However, while uncomfortable, these tensions forced many to self-reflect on their own biases.

Maria: Human nature just kind of sneaks up, and you're judging them based on your value system, on your experience. I told my kids, there are good Blacks and there are bad Blacks; good Irish; good Italian and bad. There are good people, and there are bad people. You just can't lump them together.

Janice: I'm glad I was raised to look at people as people. Not to look at their skin color. People are people.

Su: We all have biases. We all have handicaps.

Barbara: [We as] People have our own biases that we can't divorce ourselves from, but we have to try to understand them.

Maria: I had a teacher ask me, "Why in a Latino culture do you call your baby girl, Mommy? That is so sexist and it's so provocative. They're not a Mommy." Well I said, "They're little babies, just like in the African American culture you say 'Little man.' It's the same thing, but there's a judgment on whether that's right. Just like there's a judgment that my five year old was still on a bottle. Those things really stopped people from wanting to talk to you.

Harriet: As a Black child, I was told I was stupid by teachers. Sometimes teachers say some ignorant things to parents, and they don't even realize it. I didn't realize that my son was getting so many negative messages from that school. He came out thinking terrible stuff about Black people, and he's Black.

Janice: I think African Americans whose parents were born in Africa have a different upbringing and maybe learned a different set of values or morals. I have two kids that are African American first generation. The rest are African Americans who have been here for centuries. The first generation African Americans seem to be more education focused.

Harriet: That's generalizing, and that's ridiculous. It's not true.

Maria: All our parents – no matter what culture – want their children to do well. Why? Because they want their children to one day have good jobs…better jobs than the parents themselves. These parents are the first generation here, and they know how hard it is if you can't speak English or don't have a good education.

(6) Reaching out to parents from different cultures: Seven sub-themes emerged when talking about building culturally sensitive relations.

    a. Being sincere:

Barbara: To the parent, if you're open to them, if you're honest to them, and if you don't try to act like you're better than them or more superior to them, then I don't think it matters if you are from the same cultural background or not. I think they would rather have someone down to earth that they can just talk to.

    b. Asking not telling:

Su: I interview the parents. I try in that first week of school to reach out.

Harriet: What are the strengths of that family? Of that culture? What are their strong points? What do they expect?

Maria: I work hard to find out about a particular culture. I have to adapt my behavior and my values because sometimes we judge children based on our own values, our upbringing. We need to ask Mom: "How do you talk to your child? How do you discipline your child? How do you get them to listen? How do you get them to clean their room?" And use those strategies in the classroom. It takes a lot of work, but that's what we have to do if we really want to embrace diversity versus giving lip service to it.

    c. Researching:

Barbara: I had a child from an island who spoke French and Portuguese and a little bit of Spanish. I didn't know anything about that island. I read books, I asked other people in my church. (My church is very multi-cultural.) I asked another person from that island, "Are there stories that are similar to stories that we have here that I could read?" This lady said,

"I'm going to make you a tape with basic little phrases, such as 'Do you need to go to the bathroom?' 'I'm hungry.' Things like that."

d. Communicating:

Su: I think it's actually talking to them that counts. Some of my parents can't read, and so for me to send home a letter, that is just frustrating for them. So if I can't get in touch with them, I walk to their house because, if their phone has been disconnected, maybe I can help out in some way.

Su: I think we need to be flexible in the conferences. Not everyone has the same schedule. You could get 100% attendance if you could give five different options to come. You could come before school, afterwards, or you can come at your lunch hour. I could meet you somewhere after work. I could go to your job if there's a conference room where we could have a chair and take the portfolios.

e. Good news…bad news:

Maria: So I tell my teachers, find something good to call home about. Once you get these good reports, you open the communication with Mom. It's very different from when you call her seven times to tell her how bad her child is. Every time she sees you on the caller ID, she won't pick up. Why are you calling her to tell her AGAIN that he's…or they answer and say, "Oh, what did he do now?" You don't want that kind of relationship.

Harriet: It's really not about the time, but about the interaction and the rapport. It's about when the tough issues arrive, that there's a bond between parent and teacher that as partners we can discuss these issues. If you don't build that rapport in any way, then you're never going to be able to have those tough conversations.

f. Parent education:

Barbara: My school's open until 5:00 so between 3:30 and 5:00 we have different activities or seminars. We had a baby shower two weeks ago with all our soon-to-be new moms. They got gift cards to Babies "R" Us. We showed them a video on how to take care of the cognitive development of the infant and what they can do to help their child. We had another thing where all the kids came in with their parents and decorated rain sticks. Every month we try to do a different family activity. It ranges from seminars to games – time when parents can come and do an activity or talk with the family social worker.

(7) Help us to reach out to parents in a culturally sensitive way: Some of the ideas that participants identified for future professional development were

information about various cultures, examination of myths, information about body language, and finding out what parents want for their children. Additionally, the participants suggested some ideas regarding what form these workshops should take, including parents themselves as resources, organizing a symposium, open forums, including translators as needed, and even possibly organizing separate programs for parents of particular cultures.

> Maria: We have resources right in front of us. Parents from other cultures – we could ask them.

> Barbara: Perhaps we could have one night just for the Hispanic parents and another night just for the Polish parents. It might be more comfortable for the parents at first.

> Su: I would see it as an open forum between parents and teachers – where we can talk to each other and see what their hopes and desires are for their children.

Conclusions

Many focus group participants:
- were likely to say that it was important to understand and accept parents' child-rearing beliefs and practices, but yet negatively judged specific beliefs and practices.
- found it especially difficult to deal with differences based in race and class.
- in the more diverse group, participants were forced to confront their cultural biases in ways that the participants in the more homogeneous group were not.
- would benefit from professional development programs that started by asking them to confront their own cultural biases about "good" child-rearing practices.

The goal of this phase of our study was to probe the discrepancies that we found in our survey data between teachers' beliefs and their practices and to get a deeper understanding about the ways in which teachers understand and share the ethnotheories of child-rearing of the families of children in their classrooms. This, in turn, would help us to develop a more nuanced understanding of how to help teachers communicate more effectively across cultural differences. As Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework reminds us, open communication strengthens the relationship (mesosystem) between families and schools (microsystems). In order for this to happen, teachers and parents need to understand each other's cultural frameworks (macrosystems). However, the

results of this study highlighted the difficulties inherent in helping teachers to reach out across cultural differences. The results suggest that while some teachers may be comfortable espousing beliefs about the importance of understanding parent's cultural beliefs about child-rearing and education, they find it difficult to examine, in a non-judgmental way, their own cultural biases about how these beliefs differ from their own. We are not alone in this observation. Others have also examined teachers struggling to communicate across cultural boundaries and have recognized the difficulties of helping teachers move beyond changes in espoused beliefs to changes in behavior (Bermudez & Marquez, 1996; Dodd & Konzal, 1999, 2002; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000).

Judging Others

Our findings highlighted the varying degrees to which teachers shared and accepted parents' ethnotheories. Some of our participants were able to describe why it is important to understand parents' beliefs and child-rearing practices. In the example stated above, Maria said: "I work hard to find out about a particular culture. I have to adapt my behavior and my values because sometimes we judge children based on our own values, our upbringing. We need to ask Mom…And use those strategies in the classroom. It takes a lot of work, but that's what we have to do if we really want to embrace diversity versus giving lip service to it." Most participants nodded their heads at this idea. However, an analysis of the focus group transcripts revealed many more instances of teachers negatively judging parents' beliefs and practices. For example, Barbara and Janice (the two composite characters who represented White participants) expressed negative judgments about parent child-rearing practices that were different from their own, such as Barbara's comments about discipline and hitting and Janice's comments about bedtimes (both quoted previously).

As would be expected, some of the teacher participants in our study group were also parents, and they were able to report times when, in their parent role, either they or their children were exposed to teachers who negatively judged them and their cultural values. For instance, Maria recalls teachers being critical of Latinos who call their young daughters "Mommy" or who give their young children coffee. We would hope that these personal experiences would then result in more empathetic understanding of cultural child-rearing practices different from their own. However, we had no evidence from our transcripts to show that this occurs. In fact, some evidence seems to suggest that even when teacher-parents experienced judgmental attitudes from their children's teachers, they too reverted to judgmental attitudes about students and families from cultures different from their own.

While we did not explore issues of power and privilege with the focus groups, as we read the transcripts and reflected on our own experiences, we realized that issues of "judging others" are also influenced by who holds a privileged position in the dialogue. One participant, Harriet, hinted at this when she said: "A lot of teachers do talk down to some of the parents because they feel 'I am the teacher. I know what's best.'" Here she is hinting at the fact that teachers are typically privileged in parent-teacher interchanges. Additionally, although Harriet did not hint at it, White teachers are often afforded even greater privilege over parents of color. The question of privilege is further complicated when the parent is White and the teacher is Black. Who then is the privileged one? This dynamic, of course, further complicates the parent-teacher interchange and should be explored further in other studies.

While understanding a family's culture is a starting point for gaining insight into individual families, our study points out how hard it is for teachers to get beyond their own unexamined biases and have an open mind about practices that conflict with their own values. The literature in the field is clear that in order to effectively communicate, one needs to understand and accept in a non-judgmental way the frameworks of families which, in addition to culture, might be dictated by economics, geography, time, and so forth (see Trumbull et al., 2003). However, the teacher participants in our study seemed to struggle to understand and to accept as valid the implicit ethnotheories of parenting as defined by these factors. We realized that teachers need to have time to grapple with these issues in order to understand and accept the ways in which family beliefs about child-rearing, their ethnotheories, are determined.

Race and Class

Child-rearing practices in many of the families described by our participants were most starkly different from their own when race and class intersected, and this seemed particularly difficult to deal with for teachers in our focus groups. Participants tended to interpret these parents' actions as evidence of "not caring" and judged them as such, rather than trying to understand them from the parents' perspectives. Issues of discipline ("too harsh"), bedtime, valuing education, and so on led to unexamined knee-jerk negative judgments (see Barbara's and Janice's comments previously cited).

The participants also struggled to interpret parents' child-rearing practices as to whether they emerged from differences in socioeconomic status or from dissimilarity in culturally based value systems. Very few participants were able to articulate the issue that differences in child-rearing practices could be due to restraints of economics rather than values. One who was able to do so was Su, who was able to read the parents' "uninvolved" behaviors as emerging from

time constraints in trying to meet the basic needs of the family, rather than lack of concern for the child's education.

Confronting Our Cultural Biases

We found that while participants in both groups were pushed beyond their initial understandings, participants in the more diverse group seemed to develop deeper understandings. Participants in the teacher group that had little diversity (all but one member were European American women who were not currently enrolled in graduate programs) seemed to think in terms of "fixing" parents and families from different cultural groups so that they more readily reflected middle-class White values. Only two members challenged that view: the guidance counselor and the ESL teacher. On the other hand, participants in the other group (with members from a variety of racial and ethnic groups and all enrolled in a graduate program) were more willing to explore the strengths these families brought and ways that teachers could engage in cultural exchanges with parents in an effort to better understand different family values and beliefs. Perhaps this is because, as graduate students, they were more likely to be in an arena where such discussions were commonplace. Rather than proposing communication practices and activities that were one-way – teacher to parent – these participants understood the importance of engaging parents in two-way, non-judgmental dialogue in order to build a trusting and respectful relationship. For example:

> Su: I interview the parents. I try in that first week of school to reach out.
>
> Harriet: What are the strengths of that family? Of that culture? What are their strong points? What do they expect?
>
> Maria: How do you talk to your child? How do you discipline your child? How do you get him or her to listen?

Just as we need to build trust with teachers by first listening to them, teachers need to do the same with parents.

Also, because they were a diverse group, they confronted their own biases and were able to provide insight into the role teacher bias plays in family-school relationships. They took risks with each other and spoke openly about their beliefs and called each other to account when the beliefs expressed were offensive to them, for instance, the interchange between Janice and Harriet:

> Janice: I think African Americans whose parents were born in Africa have a different upbringing and maybe learned a different set of values or morals.…The first generation African Americans seem to be more education focused.
>
> Harriet: That's generalizing, and that's ridiculous. It's not true.

While this interchange created tension in the room, the participants were able to hear one African American woman's response to this perspective. Her challenge of one participant's biases helped the group as a whole to be reflective of the inherent biases held, often unaware, by each person and the impact those biases have on other members of the group. This exchange helped to steer the conversation toward self-reflection and the necessity of acknowledging and confronting biases to build healthy, open conversations and relationships.

Professional Development for Crossing Cultural Boundaries

While our participants were able to offer many good ideas for professional development for themselves and their colleagues, missing was what we think is foundational if we are to be successful in helping teachers to gain insight into their practice – examining their own cultural biases about "good" child-rearing practices. Teachers must come to recognize that their beliefs about good child-rearing practices are culturally bound and that there may be other, equally good ways. And even if the parent's practices may be problematic in some way, projecting negative judgments will not lead to trusting relationships between the parent and the teacher. Teachers need to develop the skills to listen to and learn from parents so they may understand how the parent understands her/his child-rearing practices. Deep understanding of the parents' perspective and a trusting relationship can then lead to dialogue between the parent and the teacher about their different perspectives.

Excerpts of the readers' theater script are used here to illustrate the themes that emerged from the focus groups. (Note: The full script is available from the authors, and may be used with proper citation.) The next steps in our project will be to use these results to design a series of professional development workshops for teachers. We hope to enlist some of the participants from our focus groups to help us design these workshops. We plan to use the readers' theater script as a vehicle for opening conversation about the key issues. By using the script, we hope to afford our participants a safe environment in which to explore their own beliefs and biases and to develop strategies for engaging with parents in a non-judgmental way that will engender trust and respect.

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