

CULTURE, FAMILY, and COMMUNITY

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- ? *How can educators identify the resources and knowledge that students' families and communities possess in order to enhance communication, student achievement, and family involvement?*
 - ? *How can the cultural histories and knowledge of students, families, and communities be identified and integrated into the curriculum?*
 - ? *How can family and parental involvement challenges be overcome?*
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In this section of *The Diversity Kit* we explore how to cultivate collaboration with families and communities in order to support the learning of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Research reveals that families and communities play an important role in a child's learning process (Epstein, 2001; Epstein et al., 1997; Hidalgo, Bright, Siu, Swap, & Epstein, 1995). Understanding the families and communities in which students live can help educators develop student potential. Families and communities can also support student learning. However, to do this means that students' families and communities must be considered resources to be tapped.

Sarason (1982) suggests:

[O]ne has to believe that there are diverse types of people who can be helpful in the classroom even though they have no professional credentials. This in no way means that those who lack these credentials have, as a group, a kind of folk wisdom absent in professionals. Wisdom and imaginativeness are distributed in the same way among professional and nonprofessional groups. (p. 276)

As stated above, the literature on improving student achievement identifies the central role of family and community involvement. But this requires that schools do more than simply communicate students' academic achievement. Oakes and Lipton (1999) suggest:

[A] further step is to connect students' work in school to their experiences in the community. By engaging students and their families in finding and solving real problems that matter to them at school and outside of school, schoolwork can become less abstract and detached (and thereby more likely to be learned). (p. 354)

Knowing how to relate to students whose socialization is unlike that of the teacher



entails getting to know students' communities and homes and observing them in their own environments (Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997). Further, understanding the cultural values and funds of knowledge that students' families and communities possess not only serves the purpose of improving academic achievement (though that may be the stated focus of schools), it also helps schools avoid interfering with families' child-rearing practices. When school cultural norms supplant those of the home, children can become alienated from their families. But when families and schools understand each other's values and ways of educating children, threats to family unity can be avoided and the positive effects of education within diverse cultural communities is enhanced.

Schools must look for practical ways to build meaningful partnerships with families and communities. Clearly, family and community are resources that educators need to draw upon. But as Lueder (1998) points out, it is also important that schools reconsider their assumptions about what family, school, and community partnerships can accomplish. He suggests the following benefits of these partnerships, which are far reaching and go to the heart of a school's success:

- The probability of higher student achievement, as well as more excitement and joy in the classroom and at home, is greater when this kind of learning community is created.
- Though the child remains central, engaging families and community in education will not only help the children but help the family, school, and community as well.
- When families and communities work collaboratively with the school, everyone's role becomes less stressful, more productive, and more rewarding. There will be fewer conflicts and problems. (p. 34)

Although McGroarty (1986) cautions that “knowledge of culture alone will not provide educators with sufficient knowledge to understand and modify school-related behavior” (p. 305), teacher awareness of their own culturally influenced attitudes and behavior provides a starting point for increased understanding of cultures. This kind of self-reflection can form the foundation for a better understanding of students, their families, and their communities (Brown, 1992). It is important for educators to have a fuller personal understanding of how culture influences linguistic, social, and mental behavior. In the Culture, Identity, and Development section of *The Diversity Kit* we explore cultural identity and challenge you to reflect on how culture has influenced your own identity.

Building on Family Strengths

Classroom practices should not undermine the cultural learning style of a child's home and community, though too often the cultural practices of schools have exactly that effect on diverse learners. For example, Moll (1992) contends that classroom practices underestimate what culturally and linguistically diverse children are able to do. Latino children, for example, are often assigned tasks that do not promote their educational and intellectual capabilities. The case of Latino students is not exceptional; too often schools are not as connected to the cultural practices of diverse students' families and communities as they need to be.



Scholars (e.g., Au & Jordan, 1981; Baker & Soden, 1998; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) suggest that knowledge about family and community culture should influence three major components of education: pedagogy, curriculum, and school policy. Each of these areas can be informed by knowledge of students' social, linguistic, and academic strengths. For example, teachers can observe student-teacher and student-student interactions to understand how students learn and to determine their prior knowledge in a particular content area (Díaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986). Pedagogically, when teachers understand students' backgrounds and cultures, they are best able to connect academic content to students' real-life experiences. The following vignette illustrates this well.

VIGNETTE: Bringing Schools and Communities Together

(adapted from Shields, 1995)

It's a misty, cold morning in South Bernstone, a small coal-mining and farming community in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, and a group of fourth graders is sitting cross-legged, engrossed in the "lecture" being given by Mr. McCormick, a local farmer and a student's parent. Mr. McCormick is simply describing the process of fertilizing, weeding, and harvesting the field of pumpkins. He calls on children in turn who are interested in why bugs do not eat up all the pumpkins and how much money he will make when he brings the pumpkins to market.

This is the class' third visit to the farm—they witnessed some of the seeding and came back to see the new plants sprouting their first fruits. As with their previous visits, the students will go back to school and write essays in small groups in science class. This time, however, they will also get to bring pumpkins back, some of which will be cooked in the school kitchen. (p. 197)

DISCUSSION

- Discuss the pedagogical techniques illustrated in the story.
- How would you plan a lesson around such an activity?
- In what ways do you draw upon parents' knowledge and experiences in students' learning activities?

Impact of Culture on Learning

To design effective instruction, the cultural background of the learner must be understood. Villegas (1993) suggests that teachers can build bridges between home and school by selecting meaningful instructional materials, using examples and analogies to clarify new concepts, and using varied teaching strategies that connect cultural experiences and academic content. Cultural differences in approaches to formal learning can be accommodated in the classroom as well. For example, teachers who are able to distinguish individualist cultural values and independence from collectivist cultural values and interdependence are more deliberate in providing flexible instructional activities that give students from various cultural backgrounds opportunities to work in groups and on independent tasks (Greenfield et al., 1996).

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When teachers use the skills students have developed in the home and draw upon those skills to engage students in learning new academic material, they are effectively linking the home and students' prior knowledge with school. In one example, Díaz, Moll, & Mehan (1986) observed that writing in the study participants' home consisted mainly of phone messages, shopping lists, and an occasional letter; writing was limited to its functional and practical uses. Although not much writing was observed in the home and community, parents nevertheless associated writing with being *bien educado*, or well-educated. Díaz et al.'s (1986) findings effectively illustrate that teachers' awareness of literacy acts at home (such as writing) can inform instructional strategies that rely on what students already know.

In general, to get students actively involved in writing, teachers need to use community information to motivate them. Díaz et al. (1986) suggest using strategies such as prewriting discussions to explore a topic that is of importance to the community. Teachers can also assign activities that involve the students' exploration of their own community. For example, students can conduct a survey with adults in the communities on the topic of bilingual education. After drafting a piece of writing on a topic of importance, students can seek feedback from teachers and peers and revise the piece to create a final product. At each stage students can be encouraged to respond to both the content of the piece and the message it communicates.

In *Creating Culturally Responsive Classrooms*, Shade et al. (1997) advocate incorporating social interaction into the writing process. To do this, Shade et al. offer the example of students submitting their written work to “publishing companies.” “Editors” subsequently review the work and then send their feedback to the author through an electronic mail system. The work is revised, published, and catalogued in the school’s library. Shade et al. conclude that students’ writing is enhanced when it incorporates collaboration and social interaction into the writing process. This example shows that by designing activities that require social interaction, educators can create opportunities for students to connect their unique forms of communication to the more formal writing process used in school.

ACTIVITY: Shade et al.’s Social Process of Writing

In small groups or in pairs, discuss the following questions:

- *How have you seen student writing encouraged through increased emphasis on social process? What positive effects or challenging situations has this approach resulted in?*
- *How would you have to change processes in your classroom to try an approach like the researchers used?*

Cultural Knowledge, Curriculum, and Learning

As discussed above, it is extremely valuable to create ways for students to apply social processes learned at home and in communities to school activities. But an even more direct connection between home-community knowledge and school curriculum often goes unutilized as an avenue for engaging students. This connection entails linking students' home and prior knowledge to school learning. All students enter school with certain knowledge and skills acquired in the home. Damen (1987) describes prior learning as an important factor in academic learning because students learn better when they are able to connect their prior learning to new information.

As Au & Kawakami (1994) point out, one important reason why linguistically and culturally diverse students are often not successful in school is the mismatch between school culture and home culture. They suggest that the success of these students is also affected by relationships, communication, and respect. According to Hollins (1996), building on and extending the knowledge learned in the home culture will enhance and facilitate students' academic growth and success in school.

Too often, schools fail to identify the daily experience and cultural knowledge of their learners and to integrate it with the school curriculum. Research conducted by Moll (1992; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) has revealed that educational institutions do not view working-class, minority students as emerging from households rich in social and intellectual resources. Gonzalez et al. (1993) similarly observe:

Too often, schools fail to identify the daily experience and cultural knowledge of their learners and to integrate it with the school curriculum.

Rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to school and using it as a foundation for learning, schools have emphasized what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge sanctioned by the schools. This emphasis on so-called disadvantages has provided justification for lowered academic expectations and inaccurate portrayals of these children and their families. (p. 2)

Before any meaningful attempt can be made to connect student knowledge to schooling, we must challenge the deficit assumption. However, it is not enough just to believe that students' prior knowledge is important. Hollins (1996) underscores the importance of having specific information about students, families, and communities. To begin with, teachers need information concerning the knowledge, experiences, perceptions, and expectations of the students they teach. They also need to understand the expectations, perceptions, and desires of students' parents, caregivers, and significant others. Beyond these sources, educators need knowledge about the history and culture—as well as the social, political, and economic dynamics—of the community in which they teach. Hollins (1996) suggests that

the basic premise of the theory of cultural mediation in instruction is that teaching and learning are more meaningful and productive when curriculum content and instructional processes include culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge. (p. 150)

Linguistic knowledge is the single most important type of knowledge many students bring to the classroom; it is also the type of knowledge schools most neglect to draw upon. In the case of speakers of dialects or home languages different from those used in the school, teachers can help students be successful by recognizing and building on

the strengths of the students' language. Speakers of a non-dominant language may feel that the language they bring to the classroom is somehow not valued. Effective teachers can make their instruction culturally responsive by providing opportunities for students to use knowledge of their first language to gain proficiency in English. This underscores Boykin & Bailey's (2000) observation that students' academic achievement and cognitive functioning are enhanced when the school's contexts for learning are responsive to the child's background and cultural experiences.

Teachers also need to know how to conduct lessons that reflect the values of the home culture. In cases of cultural mismatch, teachers can be informed about practices that are effective for

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students from a wide variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Sometimes teachers have to change from a traditional instructional strategy to one that focuses on the values and cultures of the students. According to Ellison, Boykin, Towns, & Stokes (2000), a skilled teacher identifies those aspects of students' cultural backgrounds that will help them self-motivate, make adjustments, and learn in the classroom. In short, teachers need to create a learning environment using the knowledge of the role culture plays in students' learning.



ACTIVITY: Examining Curriculum for Culture and Language

(adapted from Hollins, 1996)

In a small group, examine a curriculum guide or a textbook. Use the following questions to determine the appropriateness of its content for the variety of cultures and languages represented by your students.

- *How does the content provide a positive historical perspective for the related accomplishments, values, and beliefs of a culturally diverse population?*
- *How does the content reflect the accomplishments of different ethnic groups in developing new knowledge in the field?*
- *In what ways does the content allow for students' use of cultural knowledge as well as knowledge about culture?*
- *How does the curriculum address the expectations and aspirations of the students and their families?*

Overcoming Challenges to Involving Families and Communities

Families and communities can be valuable resources for schools and teachers in that they provide knowledge about the culture and language of their students. Tapping these resources requires changing how schools perceive the parents' and communities', values and beliefs. These changes include building a school culture that will accept values, beliefs, and ways of viewing the world that are often quite different from those of the mainstream population. As diverse populations come into the community, changes such as these will have to take place to ensure excellent and equitable education for all students.

Over time, the role of families and parents has gradually changed as a result of broader changes occurring in society. Changes in families' ethnic, linguistic, and racial compositions; cultural backgrounds; and socioeconomic conditions impact a school's interactions with its students' families. Further, understanding the communication patterns of culturally and linguistically diverse students can either enhance or discourage school collaboration with families and communities. Weinstein-Shr (1995) maintains that in order to help refugee and immigrant families, schools need to develop an understanding of the linguistic, religious, and geographic differences (including differences between rural and urban settings) among their diverse student population. For example, the first wave of adult refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Cuba had university educations. In contrast, most of those arriving later were farmers with little or no education.



Weinstein-Shr (1995) notes that the following three issues need to be understood when working with a refugee population: survival, communication, and power. Many refugees fled from their home country and have survived despite some very difficult experiences. Once in the United States, these groups count on their traditional kinship bonds and community organizations to provide them with resources for solving some of their immediate problems. So, while most Asian immigrants place a high value on education, parents are perplexed when the teacher asks them for help. It is

important for teachers to become familiar with how the families view the roles of the teacher and school. Social, cultural, and historic contexts impact how families participate in their children's education.

In other instances, teachers may encounter a sense of alienation in Hispanic and other families because of other kinds of cultural misunderstandings. Bermúdez (1994) identifies various barriers that limit family involvement, including (1) working parents, (2) lack of confidence, (3) lack of English skills, (4) lack of understanding of the home-school partnership, (5) lack of understanding of the school system, (6) negative past experiences with schools, and (7) insensitivity and hostility on the part of school personnel.

A brief description of each of these challenges to family participation follows.

- **Work interference:** Many parents hold nine-to-five jobs. Meetings occurring in the evening would be more appropriate for these parents. It is important to include other members of the family such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles, especially if the child is from a single-parent home. Some of these challenges can be overcome if schools assess parents' work hours and institute flexible schedules for parent activities.
- **Self-confidence:** Believing that education only takes place in school is a misconception held by many Hispanic and Asian groups as well as other recent immigrants. At times, parents lose self-confidence when schools implement partnership activities. Schools that nurture parents by involving them through non-threatening environments and through home activities that focus on family strengths have a better chance for success than schools that rely on traditional parental involvement activities. Arrastía (1995) observed in the Mother's Reading Project how mothers from different ethnic groups built their self-confidence through storytelling; together they came to understand how each individual, regardless of educational level, possesses rich knowledge that can be expressed through stories. Such programs have been successful in engaging hard-to-reach parents.
- **Language skills:** Parents who do not understand or speak English have not been able to collaborate easily with schools. Both language and (in some cases) economic realities may make them feel isolated within the school. Schools must design and implement a plan for effective communication between school and home. Good communication is at the center of effective family and parental involvement. If the school or teacher sees families and parents as resources, then communications will be two-way—initiated by teachers and by family members (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon, 1997). Schools need to look closely at various ways of helping families and communities. For example, providing English-as-a-second-language classes at the school or in the community is one effective strategy. Often when schools assess parents' needs, they gain insight into specific language needs, talents, and resources that foster effective working partnerships between schools and families.

- **Cultural differences in viewing parents' role:** In some cultures the parents' role in school is very different from the traditional American role. Because of this, teachers must be able to create partnerships with parents in a way that respects their beliefs and values. Building and gaining the trust of these parents is crucial. Participation in aptly designed programs changes parents' attitudes and perceptions as to what they are capable of doing. As they gain confidence, parents begin to understand how to collaborate with teachers. Providing multiple opportunities to participate—such as evening or Saturday activities, fairs, conferences, and meetings—will enable parents to select from an array of activities that are sensitive to their needs and life circumstances.
- **Knowledge of the school system:** Parents need to know how the school system works and how they can have access to it for the betterment of their children. Too often, school personnel mistrust or misunderstand parents, believing that they are not interested in or do not value education.
- **Past experiences:** Some parents have negative feelings and experiences related to school. Some have experienced racial discrimination, encountered few teacher role models from their language or cultural background, or have been punished in school for speaking their home language. These and other experiences are difficult to forget. Schools need to not only provide more positive experiences for students but also to engage with families in ways that demonstrate respect, make clear the desire to collaborate, and explicitly create a positive climate to counter the negative history that individual parents may have had.
- **Attitudes of school personnel:** School personnel may subtly display patronizing or negative attitudes toward parents. For example, communication with parents often occurs only in English, without regard to whether the family understands English. Schools need to welcome parents whenever they visit the school by conveying a positive attitude toward the first language of the students and families. All school personnel should have opportunities to participate in staff development that will increase their awareness and acceptance of cultural differences within the school. Communicating with parents about student progress on a regular basis sends the message that the school cares and considers families to be key partners in the work of teaching and learning.

 **ACTIVITY:** Challenging Cultural Assumptions of Parental Involvement

Refugees and immigrants come to the United States under many different circumstances. Each group is as different as the countries from which they come; they have different beliefs, values, and languages.

In a small group or in pairs, read the following teacher comment and answer the questions that follow.

“I feel so bad for these kids. The parents don’t come to parent-teacher conferences. I’ve never seen any at open house either. I don’t think they really try to help the kids with school. I wonder, maybe in their culture, education isn’t as important.”—Third-grade teacher

- *What are some possible reasons why the parents may not have participated in their child’s education?*
- *What questions might the teacher ask herself or others to gain insight into parents’ beliefs regarding their participation in school?*
- *How could parents participate in their child’s education in ways that the teacher may not know about?*
- *What kinds of opportunities can the teacher explore to collaborate with families?*

Just as parents have challenges that impede their collaboration with schools, teachers have challenges that impede their work with parents. Bermúdez (1994) reports the following barriers that impede teachers when it comes to family and community involvement:

- Negative attitudes toward parents: misconceptions and assumptions about parents
- Unfamiliar cultures: lack of understanding of the students' cultures
- Language barriers: inability to understand the parents' home languages
- Training: lack of training in working with parents
- Increased responsibilities: lack of time to develop family involvement activities
- Institutional support: lack of support from school district

ACTIVITY: Overcoming Barriers to Involvement

Divide into six groups with each group drawing a number corresponding to one of the six barriers above. Discuss your selected barrier and develop three strategies to overcome the barrier.

Onikama, Hammond, & Koki's (1998) synthesis of research on family and community participation in school offers the following general conclusions:

- Family involvement is multifaceted and complex. There are many types of family involvement in education. In developing a family involvement program, educators need to consider the cultural, linguistic, and economic factors that are relevant to the unique needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children and families.
- Home, school, and community are three major spheres of influence on children. Their interactions may be either positive or negative, close or distant, growth promoting or growth discouraging. They range from one-on-one interactions with the child to events occurring in the society itself. All three major spheres of influence should be considered in efforts to promote family involvement in education (Epstein, 1995; 2001).
- Some barriers to participation, such as lack of time and knowledge about how to become involved, cut across all cultures and peoples. Others barriers, such as language differences and distrust of schools, may be particular to specific cultural groups.
- Family involvement in some regions may have unique barriers. For example, a community's religious and cultural priorities may often affect the level of family participation in school functions. Barriers that result from the community's culture raise special challenges for educators soliciting family involvement at school (p.19).

Finally, Chavkin & Williams (1993) suggest that schools can benefit from establishing some general guidelines for family and community involvement, especially when the school proposes culturally responsive participation. School districts that are willing to establish realistic guidelines will change the way of viewing family and community involvement. Schools, teachers, families, and the communities all reap the benefits and share the common goal of success for every student.

In this section of *The Diversity Kit* we have explored the role of family and community in the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students. We have highlighted



the academic and social benefits of a culturally responsive pedagogy that incorporates students' prior learning. We have also stressed the importance of teachers knowing the cultural backgrounds of the students they teach.

In the following section of *The Diversity Kit*, we explore various aspects of language and how language use impacts the education of culturally and linguistically diverse students. We then dig more deeply into the areas of second language learning, literacy, and assessment. We reiterate that the areas of human development, culture, and language should not be explored as isolated, unrelated fields of study; rather, each of these three sections are deeply intertwined. We therefore encourage you to utilize all three sections of *The Diversity Kit* in your exploration of diversity and social change in education.

