

Chapter One

WORKING WITH FAMILIES OF
DIFFERENT CULTURES

T

*he teacher talking with us
about our family's culture and how it can be supported in the classroom.
Listening without assumptions. Representations of many cultures on the classroom
walls. Assignments that incorporate voices from many U.S. cultures. All these help
reassure me that our family's culture is respected and valued in my child's classroom.*

Parent of a second grader

Chapter
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One of the enduring truths about teaching which so many educators have learned is that in order to teach children well, we have to know them. We have to know them as individuals: what they're passionate about, what they're good at, what worries them. We have to understand where they are in their cognitive, social, language, and physical development. And, importantly, we have to understand something of their family culture.

With the U.S. school-age population becoming increasingly diverse, understanding students' family cultures has become a more important and complex issue for teachers. It's always been our job as teachers to remember that students live in communities and families, and that this world outside the classroom has a huge effect on how well they do in school. But now, more than ever, we need to be attentive to how the culture of students' family and community lives can be very different from our own culture or the dominant culture of the school. And once we begin to see the differences, we need to know how to respond.

This cultural responsiveness needs to permeate everything we do with students and parents all year long. It shouldn't be an add-on, a special diversity

project or multicultural celebration to be done during a particular time of the day or the year. Instead, cultural responsiveness should infuse all the topics discussed in this book, from reaching out to parents in the first weeks of school through celebrating the year with them during the last weeks of school. In this chapter, I offer some background information, some principles to keep in mind when working with students and parents across cultures, and then some practical strategies to try.

How Diverse Are We?

Just what kind of diversity are we talking about when we discuss diversity in the classroom? And how diverse are we? Some data can begin to paint the picture:

- In 2002, one in four U.S. children ages five through thirteen was a child of color. (U.S. Census Bureau, June 18, 2003)
- By 2020, nearly half of all U.S. children will be of color. About one in four will be Hispanic, one in seven will be non-Hispanic Black, and one in fifteen will be Asian or Pacific Islander. (U.S. Census Bureau 2000)
- In 2000, 3.4 million U.S. children ages five through seventeen (about one in fifteen) spoke little or no English. (American Educational Research Association 2004)
- The top ten home languages spoken by U.S. students learning English in 2001 were Spanish, Vietnamese, Hmong, Chinese (Cantonese), Korean, Haitian Creole, Arabic, Russian, Tagalog, and Navajo. Nearly 400 home languages are spoken by students in the United States. (U.S. Department of Education 2000-2001)

Race, ethnicity, and language are not the only forms of diversity teachers are seeing. Families also differ in income, education level, the dialect of English spoken, and how long they've lived in the U.S. They differ in family structure as well: some children are being raised by one parent, others two; some are being raised by a grandparent or other relative; some have two moms or two dads; many children are adopted. Knowing our students and their families means being attentive and respectful of all of these differences.

Hard but Exhilarating Work

Many teachers find interacting with parents across cultures to be hard work, perhaps the hardest part of their teaching. There's no doubt it can be hard. It

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challenges teachers to do things a little differently. For example, teachers may need to assign different homework for children whose parents speak no English—homework that either requires no adult help or allows parents to help without using English. Working with parents of diverse cultures also challenges teachers to stretch their powers of understanding and empathy. Fairfax, Virginia, teacher Manjula Ganesh, for example, tells of listening to one recently immigrated parent complain that her child was not being taught well because the class didn't sit at rows of desks, study textbooks, memorize, or do drills the way children did in her native country. It took time and hard work for Manjula and this parent to achieve a mutual understanding of each other's goals, concerns, and educational philosophies.

But if working with parents from different cultures is hard work, it can also be exhilarating work. In her book *The Light in Their Eyes*, education professor Sonia Nieto talks about the dazzling look of discovery in students' eyes when they become excited about learning (Nieto 1999, xix). As teachers, we come into the profession because we find joy in seeing children learn, from seeing that light in their eyes. When we build bridges to families of various cultures, we increase the chances that their children, not just the children of mainstream cultures, will do well in school.

We also open up exciting new worlds of learning for *all* children when we embrace diversity in our classrooms. Just think of the social and academic growth that can happen for all students when the curriculum reflects the traditions and contributions of all cultures in the U.S. today. In a recent study of school desegregation by Teachers College and the University of California at Los Angeles, the researchers felt it was so important for children to be exposed to various cultures that they urged policy makers to consider racial diversity as one measure of a "good" public school. (Wells, Holme, Revilla, and Atanda 2004, 7)

Many parents, too, value inclusiveness in the classroom. Bekki Lee, parent of a second grader and a ninth grader, says, "To have a teacher affirm and embrace all cultures, especially those that our society most under-represents or misrepresents, is incredibly powerful." She continues, "Teachers shape how our children see the world and each other, and it is never too early to begin developing children's respectful openness to differences."

Before going any further, I want to emphasize the importance of teachers seeking help on issues of diversity. Bridging cultures is complex business. Today, as I work with teachers in various parts of the country, I am struck by how many different cultures individual teachers are in contact with. Besides often having to

navigate several languages, teachers must learn about different communication etiquettes and child raising approaches. Trying to do this alone is daunting and impossible. We need to rely on colleagues and community members. Collectively, the staff of a school will know more than any single teacher can hope to. Together, a community can do a lot more than any one school ever can.

So often, teachers are reluctant to ask for help. Perhaps we fear that seeking help means somehow we're incompetent. Nothing can be further from the truth. Seeking help from a variety of sources shows that we understand the complexity of the issue and that we're willing to give it the attention and resources it deserves.

A Goal and a Belief

I would like to suggest one overarching goal and one fundamental belief to keep in mind as we work with families of different cultures:

A Goal and a Belief

The goal: Helping children learn

The goal in working with parents—all parents, no matter what their culture—is to enable them to support their children in learning. It sounds simple, but in the process of finding innovative ways to understand and include all the cultures of our students, it's sometimes easy to lose sight of this goal.

In *The Light in Their Eyes*, Sonia Nieto observes that many schools believe they're offering multicultural education when they're implementing "little more than ethnic additives and cultural celebrations." She writes, "Curiously missing from discussions in most schools that claim to 'do' multicultural education are statements having to do with *student learning*." Nieto recalls telling a friend one day about a multicultural education initiative in a nearby school system. After hearing the details of the project, the friend asked, "But are the kids learning?" Several years later, another friend echoed this concern during a conversation about the various ways children benefit in multicultural programs. The friend asked impatiently, "But can they do math?" (Nieto 1999, xvi)

"Are the children learning?" needs to be the question that we continually keep in the forefront of our mind as we work with all parents. Celebrating holidays from various cultures, inviting parents to share something from their culture with the class, and decorating a bulletin board to reflect diverse cultures are all worthwhile activities. But we need to ask ourselves whether such efforts, by themselves, help children do the learning they're supposed to do in school.

I believe that to help children learn, we need to have practices, policies, and beliefs that allow their parents to help them learn. That means making the small but critical everyday efforts to ensure that parents are informed of classroom and school happenings and understand their rationale. It means adapting school and classroom practices when possible to fit the child's home culture. This helps parents feel heard, welcomed, and comfortable asking questions and voicing opinions.

A fundamental belief: Differences, not deficits

How we view families from cultures different than our own deeply affects how we work with them. Families from different cultures have had different sets of experiences. As teachers, we can best help students learn if we believe their family experiences are neither better nor worse than our own, but simply different.

Literacy professor Victoria Purcell-Gates wrote about this “difference” versus “deficit” view of family backgrounds after doing a two-year study of children from economically stressed homes. As school teachers know well, children come to school having had widely varying experiences with reading, writing, and other literacy activities at home, and even English speakers come speaking different dialects of English. But, Purcell-Gates points out, if the family is poor, is undereducated, or speaks a “nonstandard” dialect, we're more likely to interpret a child's uniqueness as some sort of inherent deficit or flaw in the child or parents rather than a mere difference in experience. When we do this, she says, we risk lowering our expectations of the child, writing the child off as less teachable or even unteachable. By contrast, when we truly believe that all children can learn and that they only vary in the kinds of experiences they've had, we're more likely to maintain high expectations of all the children and, in a nonjudgmental way, build on the experiences they *have* had to help them learn at their best in school. (Delpit and Dowdy 2002, 121–139)

The “difference” versus “deficit” view comes into play in areas beyond language and literacy as well. Bonnie Baer-Simahk, a teacher of K–6 English language learners in Massachusetts, tells of working with students from Southeast Asia. Early in her career, she was surprised to learn that many of these students didn't like to take their completed schoolwork home because their parents would throw it away. “I was so upset about this, thinking that the message the parents gave to the children was that their schoolwork was not valued,” she recalls. “Later it became apparent that I was quite wrong in my interpretation.” The same parents who never displayed their children's work on the refrigerator or on the wall welcomed Bonnie into their home to talk about their children's

progress in school. They came to school to help out whenever invited. In their halting English they urged Bonnie to tell them if their children weren't doing good work in school. They also demonstrated their respect each day for their children's growing mastery of English, says Bonnie, by counting on the children to read their mail, to help them at the post office, and to serve as interpreters as they navigated life in their new country. Clearly, these parents valued their children's school efforts. There must have been another explanation for why they didn't display the children's schoolwork.

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What was the explanation? "I suspect it was a combination of things," says Bonnie. Maybe the parents didn't understand the significance of the papers or the teacher's comments on them, she says. Maybe it was because they trusted the school system totally to do its job and believed that their own role was to stay out of the way. Maybe their expectation for their children to work hard was so deeply ingrained that positive efforts didn't require any special acknowledgment or celebration. Maybe not displaying the children's work stemmed from their cultural belief that children should be taught to be humble and self-effacing. Whatever the reason, the point is that the parents' behavior reflects a *difference* in experience and norms, not a lack of care or concern for their children.

Whether it's literacy experiences, keeping and displaying children's work, or some other issue, we can best teach children when we hold fast to the "difference, not deficit" mentality. When we do this, we're more likely to see intelligence, talent, caring, and kindness, even if these are expressed in ways that we're not used to. We can then build on these assets to teach the children what they need to learn in our classrooms.

Practical Strategies

Here are four strategies that can help us fully engage parents of different cultures:

- Learn about cultures other than our own whenever possible.
- Put ourselves in parents' shoes.
- Look to parents as a resource in solving problems.
- Bring families' cultures into the classroom curriculum.

Learn about cultures other than our own whenever possible

In order to teach students, we have to know them. One important way to know them is to connect with their families and communities, which means spending time learning about their cultures.

This learning is most rewarding and interesting when we can do it in depth. As bilingual teacher Lizette Román writes, “To have knowledge of another culture does not mean to be able to repeat one or two words in a student’s language, nor is it to celebrate an activity or sing a song related to their culture. To acknowledge and respect is to be able to understand and apply this knowledge to everyday classroom activities. It is to be able to make changes or modifications in one’s curriculum or pedagogy when the needs of the students have not been served.” (Nieto 1999, 144)

So beyond repeating some words and singing some songs, what knowledge of families’ cultures are we talking about?

Here are some of the areas to be aware of:

Nonverbal communication behaviors—the appropriate physical distance between speakers; what eye contact means; whether touching is appropriate; what kinds of body postures are considered respectful

Conversation norms—who should start a conversation; what it means to interrupt; how silences are used in conversation; how to bring up sensitive topics

Values related to children’s learning—how adults teach children discipline, exercise their authority, and reinforce rules and values; whether cooperative or independent learning tends to be more valued; how adults support children in gaining independence

Cultural history—the culture’s contributions to science, the arts, education, sports, and other fields; its folk heroes; its legends; its politics

As we learn about different cultures, it’s essential to keep in mind that no one set of characteristics or values will be true of all members of a particular cultural group. It helps, therefore, to combine whatever descriptions we read or hear about a culture with our own knowledge of the individual families with whom we’re working. Also, because much of what’s written about minority groups reinforces existing stereotypes, it’s important to look for information from a variety of sources. (See the box, “Resources for Learning about Different Cultures” on page 16.)

Acquiring information about other cultures is the first important step; the next harder step is to get that information into our psyches so that we can change our ingrained habits when a situation demands it. Massachusetts teacher Bonnie Baer-Simahk tells of meeting the father of a student from Pakistan. As she approached, Mr. Khan smiled broadly and greeted her. Bonnie automatically held out her hand to shake his. He shook her hand, but visibly stiffened and

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The child and the parents themselves: This is one of the most important sources of help in understanding the family's culture. Try to inform parents honestly that you don't know a lot about their culture, and you want their help in learning about it. Most parents don't expect teachers to be experts on their culture and are happy to help if they feel respected.

Colleagues: Teachers of English language learners, home liaisons, other teachers, instructional assistants, and office or other staff may have knowledge of particular cultures and direct experience working with families of different backgrounds. Start conversations with them about the issues you're facing in working with parents. They may have ideas or skills to offer.

Your school as a whole: Ask to have conversations as a whole staff about cultural and language issues in working with parents. Staff at each grade level could learn about a particular issue over the course of the year and share the information with the rest of the school.

Other schools: Find out if there are other schools serving the same family populations as you do. See what they've tried.

Community organizations: Libraries, refugee organizations, churches, other religious organizations, civic groups, and local universities are all possible sources of help.

The Internet: The Internet contains a wealth of information and practical strategies for working with parents from diverse cultures. It also contains misinformation, so rely on credible sources. Here are a few sites to check out:

- Educator's Reference Desksm: www.eduref.org/cgi-bin/res.cgi/Specific_Populations/Minority_Groups
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition & Language Instruction Educational Programs: www.ncela.gwu.edu
- Tolerance.org: www.tolerance.org

recoiled somewhat. Mr. Khan apologized, explaining that in his culture it was forbidden for a man to shake a woman's hand. "He told me he knew better, that it was different in America, but he was new and couldn't help his reaction," Bonnie recalls. Bonnie apologized too, immediately remembering what she'd learned about Pakistani culture and realizing her mistake in offering her hand. "But like Mr. Khan, I am a product of my upbringing and culture," says Bonnie. "My automatic handshake was as natural to me as it was unnatural to him. I had read articles about Pakistani culture, and Mr. Khan was well-read on U.S. culture. We both knew better. Our reaction had less to do with what we knew than who we were." Fortunately, Bonnie and Mr. Khan both saw the humor in the situation. They laughed about the awkward moment and went on with their conversation.

Bonnie's story is instructive. It reminds us to make that extra effort to go from knowing something to securing it in our consciousness so that our knowledge translates into behavior. Her story also reminds us that we all make mistakes even when we know better. Finally, the story tells us to forgive ourselves and others for making mistakes, to learn from the errors, to go forward with a positive attitude, and to keep trying.

Chapter
One

Put ourselves in parents' shoes

To work well with parents from various cultures, it's important to put ourselves in their shoes and try to see the world as they see it. School can look and feel very different to different populations in the United States, and their relationships with school may differ dramatically as a result. There are parents who interact with teachers frequently and with ease. There are parents who advocate for services and programs for their child with tireless energy. And there are parents who, wary of the educational establishment, maintain a distant relationship with the teacher.

One kindergarten teacher tells of a student named Andre who nearly missed a field trip because his mother, a beginner at speaking English, misunderstood the departure time. The children had been told repeatedly that they were to arrive at school at 8:30 as usual, and that the bus for the field trip would pull away from the school at 9:30 sharp. Notes were sent home saying the same thing. It was expected that Andre would explain the situation to his mother. Something, however, got lost in the translation. On field trip day, the child and his mother didn't show up until the teacher was about to give up and tell the bus to go.

What was notable about the incident wasn't the fact that there was confusion about the arrival time, says the teacher, but the fact that the mother didn't ask the school for clarification. "It must've seemed odd to her, because this was late in the year, and school had started at 8:30 every day, even on days with special events," the teacher says. Moreover, the school had a home liaison who spoke the family's language. The mother could've talked to her. Still, the mother didn't call. "She was very receptive to whatever was offered to her, but she wouldn't come to the school or the teacher to ask questions herself," the teacher observes. "Even with a liaison in place, we still need to reach out actively to parents."

Many parents who don't proactively contact the school or teacher are those who feel like outsiders because of their race, ethnicity, economic status, educational background, proficiency with English, or immigrant status. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, education professor and author of the book *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other*, makes the following observation of many new immigrant families:

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Their reticence is born of not knowing the language, customs, or idioms of the new country; not knowing the norms, rules, and rituals of classrooms; and not feeling welcomed by a school bureaucracy that seems opaque and impenetrable. Not knowing all of these things makes them stay away from their child's classrooms and leaves their offspring to negotiate the school on their own. (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, 127–128)

As a teacher, I find it helpful to ask myself, "If my home culture were different from the dominant culture of this school, what would I need and want from my child's teacher and the school? What would help me feel oriented, informed, and welcomed?"

Here are some ideas:

Acknowledge every child's family culture

As Urssla Ogbenta, a parent from Nigeria, says, "Teachers should find out what country every kid comes from. When we do 'multiculturalism,' we often miss someone in the class. The teacher can't learn the language of every child, but every child's culture can be represented in some small way. Maybe the class can read a book or put up a picture about that culture, or show the flag of that country. That makes the children and families feel more valued."

Keep letters sent home simple and to the point

For parents who prefer oral communication, call on the phone instead of relying only on written information.

Find people at school or in the community who can translate

They can translate letters sent home, interpret at meetings with parents, or serve as liaisons with families.

Find out if there are local newspapers in the families' languages

Place notices and articles about school happenings in these.

Offer clarifications proactively when confusion might be possible

This is more effective than waiting for parents to ask questions. The story above of Andre and the nearly missed field trip is an example.

Label spaces in the classroom and school in families' home languages

Label spaces such as the main office, library, cafeteria, and restrooms. This could be an all-school or classroom project. Parents could also be invited to help.

Help parents understand expectations for student work

Minneapolis teacher Kirstin Keto knows that many of the Hmong parents with whom she works have had no formal schooling and may not know what's expected of children in school. To help them understand, she often takes time during parent conferences to show them samples of successful student work.

Adjust classroom activities when possible to respect families' values

Some parents told Minneapolis teacher Jeremy Nellis that they weren't comfortable with the usual Valentine's Day celebration centering on hearts, sweets, and romance. Jeremy quickly adjusted by having students write compliments to each other on slips of paper instead of exchanging the usual cards and candies.

Understand and work with extended school absences

Families often need to return to their home countries for extended periods because of family obligations. When kindergarten teacher Manjula Ganesh of Fairfax, Virginia, learned that a student would be missing several weeks of school because of a trip back to Lebanon, she gave the father a stack of books. She showed him how to help the child read them and practice literacy skills during the time away. In New London, Connecticut, second and third grade teacher Candy Bartsch assigned a child the task of keeping a journal on his extended family trip to India. When the child returned, his sharing of the journal sparked rich learning for the whole class.

I want to voice one caveat: As we actively welcome parents into the arena of school, it helps to remember that even if we take all of the steps listed above and more, some parents may not respond as we hope. Some of them may be working two or three jobs to make ends meet and may simply not have time for school activities. Other parents might need to take a while to feel sure that they're welcome at school. They may need us to reassure them again and again that we value their input.

Finally, in some cultures, it may be the norm for parents to take a hands-off approach and trust that the school will take care of children's education. Kathleen Fay, a Fairfax County, Virginia, teacher experienced in teaching English language learners, tells about a Vietnamese mother. At a conference with her, Fay encouraged the mother to tell what her son was like at home and what concerns she had about his education. "[The mother] said simply, 'Thank you for teaching my son,' and repeated it again when we said good-bye," Fay writes. "We need to remember that sometimes parents won't want to open up to us, and that is okay." (Fay and Whaley 2004, 193)

Practical Strategies

Look to parents as a resource in solving problems

Even with our best proactive efforts to make school effective for children of different cultures, problems will arise. When individual children are having trouble during the school year, the best people to go to for help are the adults in their home life. This is true for all families regardless of their cultural background. After all, these adults are the experts on the family's environment—its values, child raising practices, and expectations—and the family environment critically influences how the child learns.

In her book *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit, a scholar and champion of improved education for urban and African American students, tells of a teacher, a European American, who was working with six- to eight-year-olds on journal writing. One child in particular, an African American, was filling his journal with beautiful, intricate drawings but rarely wrote more than a few words on a page. The teacher talked to the child's mother about how the teachers were trying to encourage children to do the writing first, but that the boy liked to draw. He asked how the mother would handle this at home. The mother said, "In Black families we would just tell him write the words first." When the teacher went back and said that to the child, the boy suddenly began writing one- to two-page entries in his journal. (Delpit 1995, 180)

Encourage Families to Preserve Their Home Language

According to many researchers and teachers of English language learners, an important way for parents to help children learn English and do well in school is to speak with their children in their home language. “Parents often believe mistakenly that they can best help their child by speaking English, or trying to speak English, at home,” says Bonnie Baer-Simahk, an experienced teacher of English language learners in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. However, there is research that says learning two languages not only does not confuse children, but proficiency in the home language actually helps children learn a second language. Researchers believe this is because children use the literacy skills they develop in one language to learn skills in a second one.

Preserving their home language can also help children communicate with their parents and stay connected to their home cultures, important for all children regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. “I see many parents who can’t communicate with their children, often because the parents don’t speak English fluently and the children haven’t kept up their home language,” says Bonnie.

By encouraging parents to speak and read to their children in their home language, teach the songs and legends from their cultural tradition, and promote literacy in the home language in other ways, teachers are helping parents to help their children learn.

For research on this topic, see the following:

Cummins, Jim. 1991. “Interdependence of first- and second-language proficiency in bilingual children.” In *Language Processing in Bilingual Children*, ed. E. Bialystok, 70–89. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fitzgerald, J. 1995. “English-as-a-Second-Language Learners’ Cognitive Reading Processes: A Review of Research in the United States.” *Review of Educational Research* (65): 145–190.

Thomas, Wayne P., and Virginia P. Collier. 2002. *A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students’ Long-Term Academic Achievement*. Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, University of California-Santa Cruz.

In addition to helping us solve the problems at hand, asking for advice from parents puts us in the mindset of working collaboratively to meet a challenge. It communicates to parents, “We know you know your child better than anyone else and we value what you have to say.”

Bring families’ cultures into the classroom curriculum

As our nation’s school-age population becomes increasingly diverse, many teachers and schools are working harder at offering multicultural education. It’s now common for classes to observe various cultures’ holidays, eat their foods, and don their costumes, often during special times of year such as Black History Month or Chinese New Year.

Practical Strategies

But many in the field of multicultural education are suggesting that we go beyond studying other cultures’ artifacts, holidays, and foods—an approach that a Los Angeles school board member called “one food, two heroes and three holidays” (Swap 1993, 39). Though fully well-intentioned, teachers taking this approach run the risk of including cultures in only a shallow way. In reflecting on my own past teaching, I see that I myself often included various cultures in this “add-on” way.

Instead, many educators say, the content of the curriculum itself needs to reflect more of the views, values, history, and learning styles of our students’ families. And the main goal of this, to emphasize an earlier point, is to help students learn the concepts and skills they are supposed to learn in school.

It may seem overwhelming to integrate families’ cultures into the curriculum, especially if there are a number of different cultures represented in the classroom. But there are manageable ways to do this.

Here are three examples:

Build projects and lessons around families’ interests

Heath, Massachusetts, primary teacher Deborah Porter spends time getting to know parents and finding out about their hobbies, expertise, and family traditions. She then invites parents into the classroom to share these things with the children. One parent taught the class to weave. Another taught the children how to quilt. Others taught the children how to organize an agricultural fair. All these are part of the culture of the small rural town where the children live. Whatever a parent shares, Deborah uses it to teach concepts and skills in math, social studies, science, and other content areas. In this way, the culture of the children’s home and community becomes central to, rather than added onto, their everyday school learning. (See page 110 for a detailed description.)

Build lessons around students' interests

Lisa Delpit describes her experience at a middle school that is ninety-eight percent African American. After seeing how obsessed the students were with grooming their hair, it dawned on her that teachers could build endless lessons around hair. In science, there could be studies about the chemical properties of the hair dressing that many of the students were carrying around in their backpacks. In social studies, the students could learn about hairstyles and their social significance throughout history in different cultures. They could interview braiders about the cultural significance of different braiding patterns. In math, they could use African braiding as a way to study patterns and tessellations. “The object is not to lower standards or just teach what is interesting to the students,” writes Delpit, “but to find the students’ interests and build an academic program around them.” (Delpit and Dowdy 2002, 45)

Find out about students' cultural heritage and build it into the curriculum

Lisa Delpit tells about another teacher, Stephanie Terry, who teaches in a Baltimore, Maryland, school with a 100 percent African American enrollment. Terry reads and studies on her own to learn about her students’ ancestral culture. Whatever subject she teaches, she then connects it to the students’ heritage. In a unit about libraries, she tells them about some of the world’s first libraries in Africa. In a unit on health, she teaches students about early African doctors who wrote some of the first texts on medicine. In broadening students’ perspectives, she also teaches about the contributions of Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans. “Stephanie does not replace the current curriculum; rather, she expands it,” writes Delpit. Stephanie’s students learn their school subjects and they “learn to love themselves, love their history, and love learning.” (Delpit 1995, 181–182)

Giving Home Cultures a Central Place

Many parents feel that when their children go off to school, they must leave their home culture at the classroom door. But if we are to successfully educate all our students, we must open the door wide to these home cultures and give them a central place in our teaching. We would be able to teach better, students would be able to learn better, and parents would be more able to support their children’s learning.

Spotlight:

Somali Folktale Project

All Grades

Lyndale Community School

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Spotlight:
Somali
Folktale
Project

From the moment the first wave of Somali refugees came to Minneapolis in the mid-1990s, the Somali parents were telling teachers at Lyndale Community School that they wanted to help their children succeed in school. “Tell me what to do,” parents would say through a translator. “My English is not good, but give me math problems to do with my child.”

“I was frustrated because these Somali parents were asking to help in their children’s learning process, but we didn’t have a good way to include them or to offer a curriculum that reflected their background and experiences,” says Charmaine Owens, a teacher of English language learners at Lyndale, where about a quarter of the 300 students are from Somalia. The language barrier and the Somali families’ unfamiliarity with U.S. culture, combined with the fact that not all of the Somali parents or their children had formal education growing up, made it difficult for teachers and the Somali parents to work together actively to support the children’s education.

Then Charmaine happened on something. In studying up on Somali culture, she learned that the camel was a prized and beloved animal that was central to the Somali nomadic lifestyle. She asked the Somali students to share with the class their experiences with camels. For homework, the children were to ask their parents for three camel stories. But instead of three, most children came back with dozens of stories—folktales, personal stories, stories heard from a relative or friend. Charmaine knew she had hit on something.

Why not collect Somali folktales from the parents, write them up, and use them in the classroom curriculum? English translations of the stories could be used in all kinds of literacy lessons, and the stories could spawn lessons in geography, social studies, history, science, and more. The Somali children would have classroom content that was relevant to their home cultures, and the whole class would benefit from learning about a new culture. Best of all, the Somali parents, because they’re familiar with the stories, would be able to help their children with schoolwork related to the stories without needing to know English.

Developing a packet of stories and supporting materials

The English Language Learning (ELL) team went into action. Muhamed Ahmed, Maryan Ali, and others on the team called many Somali families in the school, asking them to contribute one folktale—not just about camels, but also about hyenas, goats, sheep, foxes, animal herders, kings, and anything else that might figure in the stories they grew up with. If the parent could write the story in Somali, the Somali speakers on the team would translate it into English. If the parent couldn't write it in Somali, s/he could tell the story to the child, who would tell it to a bilingual staff member at school. The staff member would write the story down.

Out of many stories contributed, the ELL team chose nineteen that would be appropriate for use with children in school. They produced two written versions of each story—one in English and one in Somali. They sent the Somali versions to Ibrahim Ayan, a local scholar who was an expert in written Somali, to polish up the writing. Then Charmaine developed a series of suggested classroom activities to go with each story, including discussion and background research questions, fill-in-the-missing-word exercises, plot sequencing activities, and a play that students could act out.

These materials were then distributed to other teachers at the school. Although originally intended for use in K–3 classrooms, the materials soon became popular in classrooms all the way through sixth grade. Then the district got interested and printed all the folktales and supporting materials in booklet form to give to staff in professional development trainings.

A bridge between home and school

As the team hoped, the Somali folktales now serve as a bridge between home and school for the Somali families. When children come home repeating the stories they're learning in school, the parents can enrich them by offering plot variations or telling how they learned the stories themselves as children. When the children have homework related to the stories, the parents can help by clarifying the plot, helping interpret the moral of the story, or offering background information.

“The Somali parents love this project,” says Charmaine. “When they arrived in this country, it must've been impressed upon them the necessity of education in order for their children to succeed. They came eager and enthusiastic to help their children. And here is a way they can help.”

Retaining Somali culture

Besides helping the Somali children learn English and providing their parents an entry into the U.S. school system, the folktale project also has the express goal of helping the children retain their Somali culture. Because of the long years of war in Somalia, many of the students have spent much or all of their lives in refugee camps and on the move, with little contact with their extended families or their native land. “These children have not had the opportunity to be immersed in their own culture,” says Charmaine. By making Somali folktales a focal point of their school studies, the ELL team aims to encourage the children to learn about and value their cultural roots.

Writing down the stories in both English and Somali, for example, was a conscious move to promote literacy in both languages. In addition, Muhamed Ahmed, a Somali member of the ELL team, sometimes comes into the classrooms to tell the stories. With the children gathered at his feet, he tells the stories as his grandmother told them to him and as her grandfather told them to her. “Somalis have a rich oral tradition, and oral storytelling is one way they communicated their values,” says Charmaine. When the children experience hearing a story from a Somali elder, they gain an appreciation of this traditional form of communication, she explains.

And of course it’s not just the Somali children who gain an appreciation of Somali culture. All the school’s children and staff have learned from the stories. “These parents are not only helping their own children, but they’re helping others in the building to develop an appreciation for their new friends from Somalia,” says Charmaine.

Spotlight:
Somali
Folktale
Project

Story 1
The Hyena and the Fox

Once upon a time a fox became a problem to a nomadic settlement. This fox attacked and ate their goats and sheep. One day the people gathered together to plan how they could kill this troublesome fox. The people decided to set a trap.

The fox fell into the trap that was set for her. After awhile, the people came and tied her to a tree. The people gathered wood and they put the wood into the fire.

They dug a hole near the tree where the troublesome fox was. The fox said, "Let's come back when the fire is out." Soon after the people left, a very

troublesome fox whining. He came closer, thinking the fox was very surprised to see that the fox happened?" he asked.

The fox answered, "My uncle told me to do this because I am not hungry now because I've been eating goat meat. Every time I try to escape, my uncle eats me. My uncle will kill me if I can't escape."

The hyena opened her mouth and ate her favorite food. The fox said, "Tie me up. Then you can eat me." The hyena agreed to tie the fox to the tree.

When the people came to the tree, they found the fox tied to the tree and said, "Hyena, what are you doing?"

Story 1
SHEEKADA KOWAAD
WARAABE I YO DAWACO

Bari ayaa dawaco adhi fara badan ka cuni jirtay reero meel deggan. Adhigaas oo riyo iyo idaba lahaa. Maalin danbe ayaa dadkii meel isugu yimaadeen waxaaney ka wada hadleen sidii ay dawacadaa dhibta badan iskaga dili lahaayeen. Waxay dadkii talo ku gaadheen in dabin loo dhigo dawacada. Dawacadii waxay ku dhacday dabinkii loo dhigay. Dadkii waxay ku xidheen dawacadii geed jiridiis, si looga aarsado oo waxaa talo lagu gaadhey in dab lagu dhex rido.

Dadkii waxay soo gureen qoryo xaabo ah oo aad u badan. Waxay xaabadii ka buuxsheen god aad u weyn oo ay ka qodeen geedkii ay dawacadu ku xidhnayd agtiisa. Markaas ayey xaabadii dab ku huriyeen waxayna yidhaahdeen, "Aan iska tagno, oo marka dabku uu aad u shidmo ku soo noqonno oo dawacada ku dhex ridno." Waraabe aad u gaajaysan ayaa wuxuu maqlay cidii dawacada. Markaas ayuu soo orday oo is yidhi, aad ka eryatid neefka ay dilootey maanta, waraabihii wuxuu u yimi dawacadii xidhneyd.

Intuu yaabey ayuu ku yidhi, "Naa dawaco yaa geedka kugu xidh-xidhay?" Markaas ayey dawacadii tidhi, "Waxa igu xidhay adeerkay." Waraabihii (Dhurwaa) ayaa hadana yidhi, "Oo muxuu kuu xidhay?" Dawacadii ayaa tidhi, "Adeerkay aad buu ii jicelyahay." Wuxuu arkay in aan caato ahay markaas wuxuu ii qalay wan weyn oo aad u buuran. Dabkaasna wankaas ayaa lagu karin doonaa. Aniguna waan diidanahay in aan cuno wankaas buuran, waayo gaajo ima hayso oo maalmahan oo dhan ayaan hilib cunayey, oo waxaan ka cabsanayaa inaan calool xanuun ka qaado. Markii aan damcay in aan aan ka tagana, intuu i soo qabtay ayuu geedkan igu xidhay. Markaan hilibkii cuni kari waayeyna wuu i diley.

Waraabihii ayaa intuu afka aad u kala qabtay illeen waa wax hilib iyo baruur jecel yidhi, "Ihi! ihi! ihi! aniga ayaa xariga kaa furaya ee aniga geedka igu xidh, si aan anigu u cuno hilibkaas adiguna uga nabad gasho." Markii dadkii ku soo noqdeen meeshii dawacadu ku xidhnayd, si ay dabka ugu dhex tuuraan, waxay u yimaaddeen waraabe ku xidhan geedkii. Dadkii ayaa intey yaabeen yidhi, "War Waraabe meeday dawacadii?" Markaas ayuu waraabihii yidhi, "aniga ayaa xarigii ka furay oo way tagtay."

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The Somali folktales from parents were written down in English and Somali, a conscious move to promote students' literacy in both languages.

**Spotlight:
Somali
Folktale
Project**

**Story 1
The Hyena and the Fox
A Play**

Time: A long time ago
 Place: In the country in Somalia where sheep and goats graze
 Characters: narrator, herdsman 1, herdsman 2, herdsman 3, fox, hyena

Narrator: A long time ago a fox attacked some Somali herdsman. The fox was caught and brought to the herdsman. Let me go! Let me go!

Fox: Let me go! Let me go!

Herdsman 1: Let's dig a hole next to the wood for a fire.

Herdsman 2: Great idea! We can trap some fox.

Herdsman 3: This fox will never bring us any more meat. Wait, don't burn me!

Fox: eat your sheep and goats!

Herdsman 1: Ha, ha.

Herdsman 2: Sorry, fox. We'll eat you.

Herdsman 3: You have killed your turn to die. (Makes whining sound)

Fox: While the herdsman was talking, the hyena heard that the fox was tied to a tree. Maybe I can help that? Fox: Oh! My goodness! I am so hungry. I am so hungry for sheep.

**Story 1
The Hyena and the Fox
Cloz activity**

Fill in the missing words in the story using the following words:

ache	found	meat	threw
answered	found	meal	throw
because	fox	mouth	tie
brought	goats	nomadic	trap
cook	gone	people	tree
decided	hole	plan	uncle
died	hungry	returned	untie
escape	hungry	set	untie
favorite	hyena	stomach	whining
favorite	instead		wood
fire	kill		

Once upon a time a fox became a problem to a _____ settlement. This fox attacked and ate their _____ and sheep. One day the people gathered together to plan how they could kill this troublesome fox. The people decided to set a _____.

The fox fell into the trap that was _____ for her. After awhile, the _____ came and tied her to a tree. The people _____ to throw the fox into the _____.

They dug a hole near the _____ where the fox was tied, and they gathered _____ and they put the wood into the _____. They lit a fire, and said, "Let's come back when the _____ is ready. Then we will _____ this troublesome fox into the hole."

Soon after the people left, a very _____ hyena came by. He heard the fox _____. He came closer, thinking he could _____ the fox's _____. He was very surprised to see that the fox was tied up to a _____. "What happened?" he asked.

The fox _____, "My _____ tied me here. My uncle really loves me. He tied me to this tree _____ he saw how thin and

Each folktale had a set of accompanying classroom activities that reinforced literacy and other skills.

Spotlight:

Little Things That Make a Big Difference

All Grades

Regional Multicultural Magnet School

New London, Connecticut

When it comes to helping parents of different cultures feel comfortable around school, everyday efforts make a big difference, say teachers at Regional Multicultural Magnet School in New London, Connecticut. This K–5 school emphasizes a multicultural curriculum, offering, for example, Spanish language instruction for all students. The school has a sizeable Spanish-speaking population and offers a two-way bilingual program that allows all Spanish-speaking students who so choose to be in classrooms where the instruction is given in both English and Spanish. Others students are also invited to join the bilingual program and are selected for the limited slots through a lottery system.

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In addition, the school has made the full inclusion of Spanish-speaking parents a part of its everyday culture through efforts such as the following:

Bilingual phone system

The tone of welcome and inclusion is established the first time a parent calls the school, and it's reinforced with every subsequent phone call. "Thank you for calling the Regional Multicultural Magnet School. For English, press 3," callers hear, and then immediately, "Gracias por llamar a la Escuela Multicultural. Para Espanol, oprima el 4." Spanish speakers can follow Spanish prompts to access the entire phone system.

Translating all written materials sent home

Newsletters, field trip reminders, and other notices and flyers sent home are written in both English and Spanish. Even report cards are translated for Spanish-speaking families. Such extensive translating is possible because the school has a number of bilingual office and teaching staff, including an office staff member whose job specifically includes translating. Primary teacher Margaret Sullivan says having the written materials in both languages "shows that we respect Spanish-speaking families. It speaks tons and sets up a good relationship." She adds, "It sends a message to non-Spanish speakers, too, that we value diversity."

Interpreters at family meetings

Whenever needed, bilingual staff members serve as interpreters at conferences and other meetings with parents. As with translating written materials, there is an established culture in which staff are willing to serve as interpreters if they possibly can, says principal Richard Spindler-Virgin.

Welcoming extended family to meetings

Recognizing the important role in child raising that grandparents, uncles, and aunts often have in Spanish-speaking families, the school makes it clear that extended family members are welcome to meetings, says Richard. Often, if a teacher knows that an adult other than the mother or father is the key decision maker or caregiver in the family, the teacher will specifically encourage that person to come.

Spotlight:
Little Things
That Make a
Big Difference

Meeting at off-site locations

If parents don't have transportation or prefer not to come to school, teachers offer to hold conferences and other meetings at alternative places: the local library, a coffee shop, a sandwich place, or the families' home. Some parents may be uncomfortable at school because school represents "authority" or because they think it's not their "place" to tell teachers what they think and feel about their children's education, says Richard. Meeting the teacher in a neutral public place or in their own homes can put them more at ease, he says.

Studying, not celebrating, holidays

Rather than celebrating Kwanzaa, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day, and other holidays, the children study them as part of social studies. For example, they might learn about the history of Valentine's Day, but they don't send cards or candy to each other. Teachers also invite parents to share holidays from their own cultures so that the children can study them. The teachers try to be sensitive to any parent concerns around holidays. Second and third grade teacher Candy Bartsch, for example, talks with parents about these studies during goal-setting conferences at the beginning of the year. Just before beginning an exploration of any holiday, she again contacts parents to let them know what will be coming up. If any parent feels any hesitation or discomfort with their child learning about certain holidays, Candy talks with the parent to try to understand their perspective.

Summing up the school's efforts to create an inclusive environment for families of all cultures, Margaret, the primary teacher, says, "We really just try to respect parents in little ways. It can be a little more work, but it's worth it."

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