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Bridging Cultures in Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

In this entry, we describe the relevance of the value systems of individualism and collectivism. The articulation of these two value systems led to research demonstrating that the home culture of collectivistic children often opposes the individualistic culture of schools in the United States.[1,2] The roots of this cross-cultural value conflict lie in the poverty and lack of opportunity for formal education experienced by new immigrant parents from Mexico and Central America – a sociodemographic environment in which collectivism is functional.[3] Because of the conflict between the collectivism of the home environment and the individualism of the school, this situation creates the need for educational intervention. The Bridging Cultures Project™ is just such an intervention. It was designed to alleviate the cross-cultural value conflict experienced by most immigrant families from Mexico and Central America when they send their children to U.S. schools. The project can also be applied to other minority cultures with familistic or collectivistic cultural roots.

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Research context: Applying the two cultural pathways of development to formal education

Empirical research documents cross-cultural value conflict between the more collectivistic pathway of development assumed by Latino immigrant families and the individualistic pathway taken for granted by the schools.[1,2] These differences in cultural values coalesced into five major themes; in each case, the teacher assumed the relatively greater importance of the first element in the dichotomy, while the Latino immigrant parent assumed the importance of the second element: 1) individual versus family accomplishment; 2) praise versus criticism; 3) cognitive versus social skills; 4) verbal expression versus respectful communication with authority; and 5) parent's role in teaching versus socializing the child.

Key Research Question

Based on ethnographic observation and other research,[1,2] four researchers (Patricia M. Greenfield, Blanca Quiroz, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch and Elise Trumbull) posed the question: How might knowledge of the cultural pathways of individualism and collectivism impact teachers' ability to work with collectivistic students and families?

Our research for the Bridging Cultures Project was based on Latino immigrant families and their school experience, and thus we recruited seven bilingual (Spanish-English) elementary school teachers serving large numbers of immigrant Latino students from the greater Los Angeles area.[4] Four of the teachers were Latino, three were European-American; six were female, one was male; all grade levels of elementary school were represented, kindergarten through fifth grade. In a pre-test, the teachers' responses to home-school scenarios revealed that they were strongly individualistic in their problem solving strategies (86% individualistic). After three workshops, we conducted a post-test that showed the teachers had shifted to a more balanced perspective (57% collectivistic, 21% individualistic and 21% both individualistic and collectivistic). Thereafter we conducted classroom observations, interviews and semi-monthly meetings, documenting how teachers developed, implemented and evaluated new strategies for their collectivistic students.

How Bridging Cultures changed classroom practices and home-school relations

The teachers' experimentation in their own classrooms and schools has proven the framework of individualism and collectivism to be more generative than we ever dreamed possible, resulting in vast numbers of innovations to support student learning. We have identified many of these

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classroom practices elsewhere.[5,6,7] The innovations we highlight in this entry include parent relations, language arts and classroom management.

Changed practices with families

Bridging Cultures teachers almost immediately initiated changes in how they communicated with and supported families.[8] One teacher substituted small-group parent conferences for the usual individual conferences, a change that resulted in a new parent-teacher dynamic and a group voice for the parents rather than individual voices. After one hour, parents could sign up for a private conference or ask a few questions privately.[9 (p. 69)] As a result of this teacher's success, her principal asked her to conduct a workshop at her school to encourage other teachers to try the group conference approach. Other Bridging Cultures soon began experimenting with the same approach.

Another teacher decided she would try to increase the number of parent volunteers. Although the teacher is Latina and her first language is Spanish, she reported, "Both the parents and I had difficulty approaching each other for help. Most parents had little formal education and probably did not know they could actually assist in the classroom: only a few had attended junior high or high school. I had to conduct my own informal ethnographic research about my families and began to build relationships with parents in the process… Although I was now averaging five parent volunteers a week, I still felt like there was something missing. Many parents would stay but were uncomfortable [interrupting me] while I was teaching a lesson to ask what they could do…"[5]

To support parents, the teacher compiled a notebook with an introductory paragraph describing why parental help would be so useful in the class. She also described an array of different ways parents could help in the classroom, from preparing materials to helping with reading. She also indicated that younger siblings were welcome in the class and that their presence might actually help them transition to school later on. Ultimately, the teacher more than doubled her volunteers from 5 to 12, including 10 who worked over 100 volunteer hours during the school year.[8]

Cultural knowledge facilitates learning in language arts

Bridging Cultures teachers were also successful in promoting language development, particularly important because many of their students are English learners. Frequent use of choral reading activities allowed students to practice their burgeoning English skills without fear

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of errors because their voices could blend in with the group.[6] In other cases, children normally very fearful of speaking in front of the whole class or not wanting to be isolated from the group, were assigned to groups who came to the front of the class together as each one took turns describing an object brought from home. In this way, learning to “speak out,” an individualistic goal of the school, was shaped by the teacher’s knowledge that initial group support would assist students to meet that goal.

Classroom management

One constellation of issues that seemed to be affected early on and most dramatically were related to classroom management, such as classroom rules, monitors and rewards.[8] The physical aspects of the classroom and the way it was arranged also came to reflect a collectivistic perspective in the classes participating in Bridging Cultures. In the early-elementary grades, children sat very close to each other during rug time, not on individual carpet squares as is often the case in classroom practice. The children were observed touching each other’s hair or shoes in a completely non-disruptive way, much as they might do in their homes with siblings or cousins. Because the teachers now understood this to be natural and nondisruptive, they did not have to take away from lesson time to say, “Keep your hands to yourself,” but let the children behave as they would naturally – allowing them to stay comfortable and focused, rather than potentially miserable and befuddled by a rule counter to their own inclinations.[6]

It is critical to point out that all of the teachers’ innovations were their own construction. Energized by their new understanding of the differences between the individualistic and collectivistic value perspective, teachers made changes in their classroom practices in an effort to solve problems as they encountered them.

Conclusions

There is no recommended ratio of individualism to collectivism in a given classroom, although most of the innovations in Bridging Cultures classrooms have, quite naturally, been in the direction of making uniformly individualistic classrooms more collectivistic. However, it is equally important to note that the Bridging Cultures teachers have not rejected individualism. From the beginning, they were very aware that eventually their students would have to learn how to succeed in an individualistic world – likely beginning with their next classroom. For them, the bridge to individualism was as important as the introduction of more collectivistic practices.

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We want to emphasize that the Bridging Cultures method is nonprescriptive. We provide the paradigm; the teachers use the paradigm to generate their own ideas, which vary greatly not only from teacher to teacher, but also from grade level to grade level, and from school to school.

The outcomes of the Bridging Cultures Project are causes for optimism about the potential for educational change. Note that it is highly unusual for relatively short professional development efforts to have a documented long-term impact on teacher practice beyond the training itself. In contrast, we have documented an enduring transformation in the Bridging Cultures teachers' ability to learn from and build successful strategies for their students and their families.

Acknowledgments

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WestEd holds the Bridging Cultures™ trademark and has licensed its use to the four core Bridging Cultures researchers: Patricia M. Greenfield, Blanca Quiroz, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, and Elise Trumbull.

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