Early Childhood Research Quarterly 24 (2009) 474–486

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Early Childhood Research Quarterly

Making the implicit explicit: Supporting teachers to bridge cultures

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Immigrant Latino children
Early childhood professional development
Individualism–collectivism
Home–school conflict

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we report the results of a longitudinal action research project in which elementary teachers used a cultural framework (individualism–collectivism) to understand differences between the culture of immigrant Latino families and the culture of U.S. schools. Making explicit the culture-based beliefs implicit in home and school practices allowed teachers to think differently about their students and their own teaching, and with that change in thinking came the immediate and ongoing creation of a wide range of innovations to bridge home and school cultures. Shifting to a preschool emphasis, we discuss how the individualism–collectivism framework has been used in professional development for early childhood educators. A broad view of professional development is discussed including the role of college faculty, early childhood program administrators, teachers, and families. We suggest how such professional development might be mounted through use of methods and materials that promote explicit models of immigrant cultures to reduce home–school cultural mismatches for immigrant children.

In 1998, the National Educational Goals Panel suggested that not only do children need to be ready for school, but that schools also need to be ready for children (National Educational Goals Panel, 1998). For the most part, schools and districts have emphasized getting children ready for school – only the first half of the equation. Evidence of this comes from the proliferation of standards that promote early learning in preschool (Scott-Little, Lesko, Martella, & Milburn, 2007). But what of the second half of the equation, making schools ready for children?

In the case of immigrant children (those who were born outside of the U.S. or who are children of parents who immigrated as adults), this second recommendation – to make schools ready – is of critical importance. In 2005, 21 percent of all U.S. children lived in immigrant families, including 3.1 million children born outside the U.S., and 15.7 million children living with at least one foreign-born parent (Kids Count, 2007; see also Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2008). Most immigrant children are faced with the demand of learning or further developing a new language. Their parents may be unfamiliar with education in the United States, specifically how it is carried out and what will be expected of them and their children. At least as important, but less readily understood, is how fundamental differences in culture-based beliefs about child development and learning may guide different expectations for children on the part of parents and teachers (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Greenfield, Suzuki, & Rothstein-Fisch, 2006). These factors—language, unfamiliar educational contexts, and cultural differences—come into play, whether immigrant children first enter preschool or elementary school.

Although we focus on culture, we understand that language and culture are thoroughly intertwined and together constitute the foundation for both the child's socialization and identity development within the family (cf., Gilliard, Moore, & Lemieux, 2007; You, 2005). Increased access to preschool education for immigrant and other English language learners must

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0885-2006/$ – see front matter © 2009 Published by Elsevier Inc.
doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2009.08.006

be coupled with increased understanding about how to avoid undercutting children's home languages and home cultures in the process of introducing a new language and culture (cf., California Department of Education, 2007; Lee & Oxelson, 2006; Wong Fillmore, 1991). The research and recommendations we present here proceed from the assumption that it is both possible and desirable to design early childhood settings to build on the cultural strengths of children's homes rather than supplant those strengths with mainstream language, values, and practices (Trumbull, 2005). So, what do early childhood educators need to know in order to adapt to the needs of such learners and their families?

In this paper, we discuss the Bridging Cultures Project™,[1] a longitudinal action research project centered on investigating the usefulness of a framework for understanding differences between the cultures of immigrant Latino children (the largest group of immigrants to the United States, Hernandez et al., 2008) and the dominant U.S. culture. At its heart, the Bridging Cultures Project is about professional development that can have a significant impact on teachers' thinking and practices related to the role of sociocultural influences in the classroom, particularly for immigrant Latino children and their families.

Previous publications have documented Bridging Cultures teachers' changes in perceptions about culture (Trumbull, Greenfield, Rothstein-Fisch, & Quiroz, 2007) and their effective innovations in a variety of domains: classroom management (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008), literacy instruction (Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, & Hasan, 2000), parent involvement and home–school relationships (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003), and parent–teacher conferences (Trumbull et al., 2007). It is evident that the cultural issues identified in the Bridging Cultures Project are equally salient in the preschool years. Drawing on what has been learned through the Bridging Cultures Project, we build a case for applying for what has been learned from promising work with elementary school teachers to early childhood education. In particular, we examine new findings specifically related to: (1) the potential usefulness of professional development for early childhood educators that is designed in ways to meet their particular needs and (2) the potential value of workshops on culture for immigrant parents of young children.

The Bridging Cultures Project is based on the theory and research related to the cultural value systems of individualism and collectivism. Thus, we begin this paper with an overview of individualism and collectivism. Next, we describe the research methods and results of the Bridging Cultures Project, with special attention to how elementary teachers have made school culture explicit to themselves, children, families, and colleagues. We explore the role of professional development in moving early childhood educators toward an understanding of individualism and collectivism. Finally, we discuss how the development of explicit cultural knowledge is essential for both getting schools ready for children and children ready for school.

1. The theoretical framework of individualism and collectivism

The Bridging Cultures Project was designed with the goal of exploring whether the cultural values framework of individualism and collectivism (Greenfield, 1994; Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1989) would be a useful tool for helping teachers to understand key differences between the cultures of their immigrant Latino students and the culture of schools they attend in the United States. Cultures that give priority to the needs of the individual—such as independence, freedom of choice, self-expression, and private property—can be described as "individualistic." Those that give priority to the needs of the family or group, such as social relationships, group success, group consensus, respect, and shared property can be described as "collectivistic."

The dominant culture of the United States is highly individualistic. In contrast, many of the cultures of the most recent immigrants to the U.S., as well as those of its indigenous peoples and many others, are highly collectivistic. This is true of Latin American cultures, Asian cultures, and African cultures in general (see e.g., Greenfield & Cocking, 1994; LeVine et al., 1994). However, cultures are not strictly bounded; that is, there is considerable overlap in the values, expectations, and practices of cultures (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). Nevertheless, patterns in the relative emphasis placed on one or another set of values are identifiable. Individualism and collectivism are associated with different child-rearing goals, norms of communication, notions of social roles, and concepts of development, learning, and schooling (Greenfield et al., 2006).

1.1. Research on individualism–collectivism with elementary school teachers

Research by Raeff, Greenfield, and Quiroz (2000) demonstrated that immigrant Latino families solved home–school problem scenarios in ways very different from their child's fifth-grade teacher and their own children, to some extent. The collectivistic families tended to value helping and sharing more than personal choice and individual autonomy. The teachers were more likely to value personal choice and individual autonomy more than helping and sharing. Children seemed to be left in the middle—vacillating between the values of the school (expressed by their teachers) and the values of their homes (expressed by their parents).

In a related study by the same researchers (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff, 2000), nine naturally occurring parent–teacher conferences between immigrant Latino families and their child's teacher were videotaped and transcribed. Five main sources of conflict were revealed by discourse analysis—specifically when non-cooperative discourse occurred (in other words,

[1] Bridging Cultures™ is a registered trademark of WestEd, with permission granted for its use to the original four core researchers: Patricia Greenfield, Blanca Quiroz, Carrie Rothstein-Fisch, and Elise Trumbull.