

Family and Culture

The subject of family and cultural influences on schooling is far too broad to address adequately in a few pages. However, it is absolutely essential that all of the foregoing program considerations, from planning to evaluation, be framed by an awareness of and sensitivity to the diverse cultural expectations students and their families bring to school. These expectations can be easily overlooked as educators become engrossed in the program development and implementation concerns. One way to avoid forgetting who the program recipients are is to involve the parents and community in program planning and implementation. The remaining discussion indicates some of the ways school personnel can address the varied socio-cultural backgrounds of ELs and their families.

Family and Home

Dress, appearance and speech may all attest to the fact that students come from home environments quite distinct from those of most English-speaking students, but sometimes LEAs assume that all families and students are prepared for and view school similarly. These assumptions lead to difficulty for schools, families and students. In fact, families' cultures bring widely varying views of school, education, and teaching. They hold different expectations for, among other things, the role of the teacher, and the length of time one should go to school, the outcomes of schooling, and even whether males and females should study.

This diversity can also mean that involving parents in their children's education may be challenging. It is clear, however, that programs which do find ways of involving parents are successful not only within the school, but in the larger community as well. The following considerations have proven helpful in programs where parent involvement is high:

- Determine the cultural expectations for communicating with families.
- Will teachers personally call or visit families?
- Would parents be more comfortable meeting at school, or meeting at a neutral site?
- Is there an institution or contact person for the community (an elder member or ecclesiastical leader)?
- Who is an appropriate interpreter, if needed (e.g., male or female)?
- Orient families to the school (location, policies, communication, etc.) with language or visual supports.
- Be mindful of other considerations: housing, counseling, employment or nutrition assistance, and health.
- Offer relevant educational services to the parents: English classes, vocational training, and so on.

Larger cities often have organizations and churches that also work with newcomer families in different capacities. The state Department of Social Services, Vocational Education, and other regional groups also have services to offer migrant and immigrant families. Schools have found that collaborating with these kinds of organizations provides more balanced support for families, and relieves the burden on the school.

If a particular group of people is likely to stay in one area for any length of time, the district will greatly benefit from developing a file on their social and cultural practices and the school's experiences with them. It is important that this information be provided to ALL school personnel, in order to minimize cultural misunderstandings.

Parent and school information sharing

The significance of parental involvement cannot be overemphasized. In order for parents to get to this point, the school must have clearly articulated its program and expectations for ELs in a language that the parents can understand. The families of ELs are resourceful in providing information about their children. School personnel are

encouraged to interact with the new families to gather the linguistic, social and cultural resources of their new students and their communities of origin. During school and family conversations, questions may include language use practices, students' life at home, parents' expectations, parents' knowledge about schooling, and their areas of expertise for future collaboration. School personnel may share information related to the American education system, expectations, opportunities and any available resources at school and in the host community.

Facilitating Parental Contact

One of the biggest challenges to parental involvement is that of making school accessible. The work situation of the parent/guardian of ELs may limit their availability. As a result, teachers may need to be innovative in their attempts to meet with or contact parents. Things to consider include:

- type of work parents are involved in: agricultural, food processing, etc.
- availability of factory or business facilities (offices, classrooms) for meetings
- settings that are attractive to parents (a park or library as opposed to school)
- child care
- the language of announcements and meetings

Cultural backgrounds and many other factors may prevent EL parents/guardians from attending school meetings, conferences, open houses, etc. School administrators must adapt their schedules to allow choices. Schools are advised to inform EL parents/guardians as soon as activities are planned to allow them to make arrangements at work.

Parental Literacy

The education of ELs can be complicated by family background and home environment. Students may come from families where only certain kinds of schooling are valued, or where a child may only be expected to attend school until he or she is old enough to work or get married. There may not be a history of educated, or even literate, family members with whom children can interact. Expectations for parental involvement in school needs to be balanced with an understanding of each student's home background. For example, sending home native language books for parents to read with their children can be counterproductive if the parents are illiterate.

Regardless of the educational background or literacy of the parents, communication among family members is crucial to any child's growth and development. Schools should not impose limitations on family interactions.

Parents should NOT be told to speak only English with their children.

There are two important reasons for this. One, family communication involves emotion and identity. To limit communication is to limit the interpersonal interactions, which help develop this identity. Two, if the parents are not proficient in English, the English model to which children are exposed will be deficient, and can establish non-standard patterns which are difficult to overcome in school.

Parents should be encouraged to teach their children what they do know, and even reinforce new concepts at home in the native language, if possible. A few examples of printed materials that can involve parents are listed in the Resources section.

Parental Communication

From “Helping to Ensure Equal Access to Education, Report to the President and Secretary of Education” 2012: Districts must:

“Develop a plan to provide services to LEP parents that ensures that they have meaningful access to the district’s programs; the plan will include providing interpreting and translation services for all non-English languages.”

This means that districts are expected to provide interpreting and translation services for all home languages within the district. Some educational programs, such as Title I and Special Education, include specific requirements to use the home language in communicating with parents; many schools still neglect to consider this option in all areas. While it may seem like a daunting task, the reality is that in most cases, there are web-based translation sites, dedicated translation programs for many platforms, extended family members, volunteers, higher education staff or students, or other persons able to provide written and spoken translation of school policies, announcements and program information. Many statewide and nationwide programs have information available in common languages already (e.g., Spanish).

Taking the time to communicate with parents in the language they best understand will increase parental involvement and interest in school, prevent misunderstandings about program services and purposes, and even serve as support for the native language.

Culture

Too often, our views of other cultures consist of items such as food, music, art, and holidays. How many times has your school had a day or month devoted to a particular people or culture, but the celebration consisted of food samples, famous people, or pictures of clothing? While these things are important, they are only outward manifestations of people’s encounters with and perspectives on the world. Only by recognizing the beliefs and perceptions underlying those manifestations will we create more equitable educational experiences.

For this reason, some people talk of culture as an iceberg; only a small part of it is visible, and sometimes not being aware of the greater part leads to accidents or disaster. Interestingly, many of the laws regarding the equitable treatment of students do imply consideration of the underlying aspects of culture that give meaning to our lives. Schools are to be considerate of and avoid preferential or inappropriate treatment of students based on gender, linguistic background, race, religion, and handicapping conditions.

Culture Shock

The first and perhaps most difficult issue to confront is the realization that one’s personal view of the world is not the only or right view of the world. This realization sometimes comes if we have traveled to another country, or even to an unfamiliar part of the U.S. At such times we may find that our assumptions and expectations about things such as promptness, neatness, personal hygiene, driving, shopping, respect, personal space, and a hundred others are challenged.

It is then, depending on how long we remain in that context, that most of us find that we go through varying degrees of feeling excited, intrigued, lonely, depressed or even angry. These reactions to the unfamiliar have been called “Culture Shock.” The process of working one’s way through these reactions and coming to terms with the new setting may take a few weeks or a few months. Some never do adjust.

ELs also go through varying degrees of culture shock. Teachers can lessen the difficulty of adjusting by respecting and understanding students' backgrounds and asking them to contribute their customs, beliefs, and behaviors to class and school. Having other students become classroom buddies with new students can also help students develop social skills more quickly.

A Few Basics

There are some general areas of cross-cultural significance that all educators should recognize.

Touch	Some cultures frown on touching the top of the head. Some cultures have taboos about which hand is used to eat or pass out papers with.
Gesture	"OK," "Come Here," even pointing at someone may be signaled differently, or not at all, in different cultures.
Space	U.S.-born Americans often expect much more personal space (up to arm's length) than do other cultures (as little as a few inches).
Look	Student eye contact with a teacher or adult is inappropriate in some cultures.
Dress	Some students may dress up for special assignments or days; some cultures have different expectations for males and females (such as keeping females' heads, or entire bodies, covered).
Role	Other cultures expect students to cooperate in different ways; some expect the good of the group to come ahead of the individual.
Topic	Appropriate topics of discussion vary from place to place: age, politics, job, marital status, and so on. Some conversations are appropriate for mixed groups; other topics are for male- or female-only groups.
Y/N	The meaning of "yes" and "no," as well as their expression, vary from culture to culture. Many cultures consider it rude to negate or deny a request or question outright; instead, disapproval may be signaled in a roundabout way.
Label	Terms for some groups (e.g., "Asian") actually encompass a wide variety of peoples and cultures. Others (e.g., "Hispanic") are not necessarily widely accepted; individuals may consider themselves something else ("Latino or Latina"; "Chicano or Chicana").
Name	In some cultures, names are rarely used to identify family members, older community members, etc. Students will say sister, aunt, teacher, etc. Teachers should not insist that the students call them by name. Many students will simply say, "Teacher" or "Miss." This is meant as a term of respect.
Food	There are some foods that must not be eaten for religious or cultural reasons. This must be respected. Conversely, some cultures eat things that are not typically eaten in the United States.

Flexibility and School Expectations

There are no easy rules for when to accept different student behavior and when to insist on conforming to the rules of the school. Obviously, behavior that poses a threat to others cannot be tolerated. The key again is effective communication with the parents. When students enroll in school, parents need to not only receive a school policies handbook, but also understand the contents. They need to know why the policies are in place. At the same time, schools should communicate a desire to understand the new student(s), and a willingness to accommodate different beliefs and expectations to the extent practicable.

This may mean allowing students time for religious practices that don't follow a Judeo-Christian calendar, for example. Or it may mean allowing different dress when students participate in athletics. As with other new experiences for schools, contact with other districts that have worked through these issues can provide valuable models or suggestions for how to deal with linguistically and culturally diverse students.