Helping Teachers Discover Students’ Cultural Needs through Parent Communication

Dr. Kashunda L. Williams, Dr. Beth A. Jones and Dr. Stacy A. S. Williams

It is crucial for teachers to possess cultural diversity awareness and understanding. The authors’ view is that teacher education about culture should be individualized by student and should partially come from parents. The paper provides readers with information about the need for culture-specific teacher communications with parents and to propose that parents’ perceptions of their children’s cultural needs can aid in the development of teacher cultural awareness. The authors examine three assertions: (a) how parents’ ideas of their child’s cultural needs are developed as a function of parents’ cultural efficacy, (b) the relationship between parental characteristics and the cultural information parents want teachers to be aware of, and (c) that there is a possible relationship between school-home communication and the development of teacher cultural awareness. The cultural contexts of educating culturally diverse students and the factors which create variation in those contexts are addressed.

The U.S. Department of Education - National Center for Education (2010) reports that approximately 45% of children in U.S. public schools are from culturally diverse backgrounds. Yet, the percentage of non-White K-12 teachers is approximately 10% (Colombo, 2005). Given the discrepancies between student and teacher race and ethnicity, one could suggest that there is a need for teachers to understand and connect with their students culturally. Cultural awareness involves developing sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group. Specifically, Tomlinson (2001) argues that cultural awareness is comprised of a gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people’s cultures, and interest in the similarities and differences in cultures (cited in Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004, p. 3). Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) assert that increased cultural awareness helps broaden minds, increases tolerance, and results in greater cultural empathy and sensitivity.

Traditionally, cultural awareness development is facilitated during teacher education program training and post-graduation trainings (i.e., professional development opportunities such as district trainings, campus trainings, workshops, conferences, continuing education experiences, etc.). However, the cultural information shared via the above mentioned training opportunities is often very global in nature. Additionally, literature indicates that teachers’ cultural awareness remains low even after the completion of their teacher preparation programs (Brown, 2000; Grant and Secada, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1995; McDiarmid and Price, 1993; Sleeter, 2001). A review of the literature suggests that increased cultural awareness in teachers increases teacher efficacy and can lead to improved minority student outcomes (Ediger, 2003; Thompson & Smith, 2005; Tidwell & Thompson, 2008; Tucker et. al., 2005). It is the authors’ view that in addition to a global understanding about cultures obtained from coursework and professional trainings, teacher education about culture should be individualized by student and should partially come from parents.

Effective home-school communication requires advance preparation by all parties, charges teachers with the goal of receiving as much information as they provide, and centers around positive communications that utilize a conversational approach (Minke & Anderson, 2003). Anderson & Minke (2007) found that parent perceptions of their involvement in their child’s education were impacted directly by being specifically invited to participate by school personnel. Further, Patrikakou and Weissberg (2000) found that teacher outreach to parents is a better indicator of parental involvement than socio-demographic variables and that student success is linked to the quality of parent-teacher interactions rather than the quantity.

Because the goal of the present authors is to promote multicultural competence in educators, the purpose of this paper is to raise awareness regarding the need for cultural specific teacher communications with parents, to suggest that parents’ perceptions of their children’s cultural needs can be useful, and to propose that parents’ perceptions of their children’s cultural needs can aid in the development of teacher cultural awareness. Building upon, and exposing gaps in, the existing literature, the authors assert three positions based on these topics: (a) parents’ ideas of their children’s cultural needs are developed as a function of their
Table 1

Critical Definitions Related to Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Awareness</td>
<td>involves developing sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Needs</td>
<td>elements of an individual's culture that are perceived as essential and that they strive to attain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy</td>
<td>belief in one’s own ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Efficacy</td>
<td>parents’ beliefs in their ability to influence their child and their environment in order to foster the child’s development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Cultural Efficacy</td>
<td>parental belief about their own level of cultural knowledge and the ability to share that knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural Transmission</td>
<td>the process of transferring cultural information from one generation to the next or from one group to another</td>
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<tr>
<td>Racial Socialization</td>
<td>the responsibilities that Black parents have of raising children that are physically and emotionally healthy, in a society in which being Black has negative connotations</td>
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Parental cultural efficacy, (b) that there is a possible relationship between parental cultural efficacy and the cultural information parents want teachers to be aware of when educating their children, and (c) that there is a possible relationship between school-home communication and the development of teacher cultural awareness (see Figure 1). Each of these positions is addressed, respectively, in the following three sections. Table 1 is intended to facilitate the reader’s understanding of key terminology pertinent to this discussion.

Parental Cultural Efficacy and Children’s Cultural Needs: Parent Perceptions of What Students Need

While working within/with schools, many of us have heard the saying, “No two students are exactly alike.” That same saying is also applicable to parents’ ideas of their children’s cultural needs. That is, all parents from the same ethnic/racial background do not identify the exact same desired cultural needs for their children. For the purposes of this discussion, cultural needs are defined as elements of an individual's culture that are perceived as essential and that they strive to attain. Although they may be members of the same ethnic group, parents have individualized notions of what is best culturally for their children. Furthermore, these individual differences exist among sets of parents that reside within the same community and/or are members of the same family.

So, how are these individualized parental expectations of cultural needs for children developed? While not based on empirical findings, it is logical to presume that parents’ perceived cultural needs for their children stem from each parents’ cultural efficacy and that the level of parental cultural efficacy shapes the cultural messages parents share with teachers. This argument is explained in more detail below.

As we move beyond viewing groups as a static entity to viewing minority groups as an evolving organism influenced by, but not limited to, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion, it becomes paramount for us to understand the minority parent and their efficacy (i.e., belief in their ability) related to transmitting cultural knowledge to their children. Few studies have researched the effects of parental efficacy as it relates to academic achievement in urban youths (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Morris, Taylor, Nunnery, Burr-McNeal & Knight, 1995), however fewer studies have examined African American parents’ cultural efficacy (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004).

According to Bandura (1997), perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one’s own abilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given
results. Ardelt and Eccles further define parental efficacy as “the parents’ beliefs in his or her ability to influence the child and his or her environment to foster the child’s development and success (p. 945).” Hence, parental cultural efficacy can be further defined as the parent of color’s beliefs in his or her “cultural” ability (i.e., knowledge of cultural capital) and the ability to foster and develop cultural awareness in their children.

Moreover, we assert that parental cultural efficacy in parents influence opinions of their children’s cultural needs. For example, it is possible that a parent categorized as having a high level of parental cultural efficacy (i.e., believe they have much cultural knowledge and the ability to share that knowledge) would judge their child’s cultural needs as high (i.e., they require or want much acknowledgement of their child’s culture). In contrast, it is possible that a parent categorized as having a low level of parental cultural efficacy (i.e., believe they have little cultural knowledge and the ability to share that knowledge) would judge their child’s cultural needs as low (i.e., they require or want little acknowledgement of their child’s culture).

The true relationship and direction of the influence of parental cultural efficacy on perceived cultural needs for their child has yet to be studied. It is the authors’ opinions that this relationship warrants more research because it heavily influences the cultural messages parents share with teachers. A better understanding of the relationship between parental cultural efficacy and their child’s perceived cultural needs could lead to more accurate predictions about the cultural message parents send to teachers.

**Parental Cultural Efficacy and Cultural Transmission: What Parents Want To Share**

Cultural transmission is the process of transferring cultural information from one generation to the next or from one group to another, which carries with it significant implications for the adaptation and persistence of a culture (Schönpflug, 2009) and for family relationship dynamics (Dennis, Basanez & Farahmand, 2010; Padilla, 2006). We propose that the type of cultural transmission (i.e., cultural messages communicated to teachers) will depend on parental cultural efficacy. Additionally, the authors believe that there is a possible relationship between the cultural messages parents share with their children and the cultural messages that parents share with teachers. However, a search of the literature exploring the connection between parent cultural efficacy and cultural transmission proved unsuccessful. Contrastingly, a search for the transmission of cultural knowledge (i.e., the cultural messages parents communicate to their children) yielded abundant results in the socialization literature (Lesane, 2002). The following paragraphs examine the cultural messages parents communicate to their children.

Racial socialization (Peters, 1985) is often defined as “the task and responsibilities that parents have of raising physically and emotionally healthy children...in a society in which being [a minority] has negative connotations (as cited in Caughy, O’Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002, p. 1611). Caughy et al. (2002) interviewed 200 African American families from economically diverse communities who had children between the ages of 3 and 4.5 years. They demonstrated that the racial socialization messages to preschoolers were relatively high, with parents 90% of the time transmitting knowledge about racial pride, and 64% of parents incorporating messages related to mistrust of whites.

In 2006, Caughy, O’Campo, Netles, and Lohrfink explored the racial socialization of first graders living in communities defined by high social capital and low social capital. Communities high in social capital have a sense of connectedness and the willingness of community members to intervene in community problems. These are communities with a lot of support and/or resources. Communities low in social capital are communities that are characterized by disorder and/or chaos. Caughy et al (2006) found that as the negative climate of the community increased, the messages transmitted to children had more to do with preparation for bias and promotion of mistrust. In essence, racial socialization emphasizing racism and discrimination increased in communities low in social capital.

Coard, Wallace, Stevenson Jr., & Brotman (2004) explored the prevalence of racial socializing messages among 15 low income mothers of children 5 and 6 years old. In particular, parents stressed racial pride 93% of the time, racial equality 86% of the time, messages of bias 73% of the time, and messages related to racial achievement 67% of the time. Hughes and Chen (1997) explored racial socialization of African-American families and children ages 4 to 14 years old.
Hughes and Chen noted that messages about cultural history and heritage were more common than messages about racial bias and discrimination. Additionally, they found that parents reported more racial socialization of older children than younger children.

Based on this review of the racial socialization literature, as it relates to cultural messages sent from parent to child, we cannot say exactly what parents want teachers to know about their children’s cultural needs. That is, we cannot predict what cultural messages parents will share with teachers. However, a review of this literature does imply that there is variance among the messages that parents convey to their children, and that these messages are influenced by parental characteristics such as socioeconomic status, community in which they live, and the age of their child. We infer that messages from parents to teachers disseminating cultural information will have similar influences and that in combination these influences relate to parental cultural efficacy. We believe that the high degree of variance in cultural messages further supports the need for teachers to conduct an individualized assessment of students’ cultural needs.

Much research is needed to examine the cultural messages parents share with teachers and to determine if there are possible relationships between parental cultural efficacy and the content of the messages shared with teachers. Additionally, research should be done to examine the changes in the content of the cultural messages parents transmit to those (e.g., teachers) outside their family, race, and/or culture. A better understanding of the cultural messages that parents share with their child’s teachers could have several implications for all involved; parent, student, and teacher. Specifically, the authors believe that parent-to-teacher cultural messages can foster cultural awareness for teachers.

**Parental Communication and the Development of Teacher Cultural Awareness: What Teachers Learn by Talking to Parents about Culture**

Existing research has proven that when parents and teachers work together, everyone benefits; students tend to earn higher grades, perform better on tests, attend school more regularly, have better behavior, and show more positive attitudes toward themselves and toward school (Canter, 2004). Based on a review of 66 studies, reviews, reports, and books, Henderson and Berla (1994) concluded that parents can make critical contributions to student achievement, from preschool through high school. They also concluded that efforts to improve children’s outcomes are much more effective if they include a family element.

Parental communication directed to teachers about student cultural needs could have many potential benefits. Namely, communications could increase teacher knowledge and cultural competence. According to Ye He (2013), teacher cultural competence is defined as teachers’ “abilities to recognize their own world views, to understand and embrace the cultural diversity of their students, and to confront their potential biases and assumptions in their interactions with diverse students and their families” (p. 56). Other potential benefits of parent-teacher communication about students’ cultural needs are more appropriate teacher-student interactions and improved student achievement (Keengwe, 2010). It is also possible that parent communication about students’ cultural needs could impact teachers’ beliefs about how students learn and the expectations that they have for them, thus influencing their lessons (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2008). Additionally, when teachers become culturally competent, they model the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of culturally competent professionals and students’ cultural competence is enhanced (Keengwe, 2010).

If communication between parents and teachers can yield the development of cultural awareness in teachers (and all the student benefits that result), then efforts should be made to initiate teacher/parent discussions about culture--especially when teacher cultural efficacy about cultural awareness is low. Teachers should be assured that they have additional options in developing their cultural competence and that they can take an active role in developing and strengthening their cultural awareness, specifically for the students and families with whom they work most closely.

**Conclusion**

The goal of the authors is to promote multicultural competence in educators. The authors theorize that there is a relationship between parental involvement (i.e., via home-school communication) and the development of cultural awareness in school professionals. When purposing to involve parents, we argue that educators must be cognizant of the possible relationship between the levels of parents’ cul-
tural development and the manner parents’ desire educators to view and interact with their children. Furthermore, the authors’ propose that the type of cultural transmission will depend on parents’ cultural efficacy. An increased understanding of these concepts among educators may result in more effective home-school communication and improved student outcomes.

References


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