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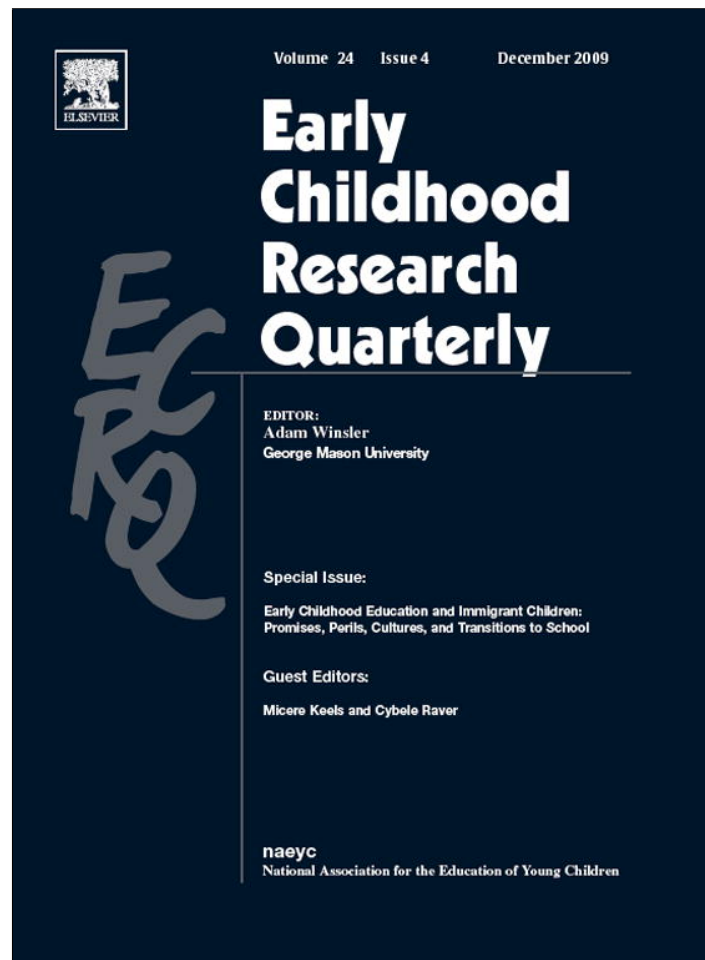
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Making the implicit explicit: Supporting teachers to bridge cultures

Carrie Rothstein-Fisch*, Elise Trumbull, Sandra Gloria Garcia

Educational Psychology and Counseling, California State University, Northridge, USA

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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.

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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

* Corresponding author at: California State University, Northridge, Michael D. Eisner College of Education, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8265, USA. Tel.: +1 818 677 2529.

E-mail address: carrie.rothstein-fisch@csun.edu (C. Rothstein-Fisch).

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^{TM,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 CulturesTM 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.

when the listener does not pick up or ratify, confirm, or elaborate on the speaker's point). The areas of conflict, from the perspective of the teacher compared to the parent were: (1) the teacher's interest in the individual child's achievement versus the parents' interest in the family as a whole; (2) the teacher's praise for the child's individual accomplishments compared to the parents' criticism to encourage the child to contribute to the group's success or for behavioral improvement; (3) the teacher's emphasis on cognitive skills compared to the parents' encouragement of social skills; (4) the teacher's value of oral expression versus the parents' value of respect for authority through quiet listening; and (5) the teacher's expectation of parents to be teachers at home compared to parents expectation that "teaching" be the responsibility of the teacher.

1.2. *Benefits and limitations of using a dichotomous framework*

Despite the apparent usefulness of the individualism–collectivism framework for understanding these parents' perspective, we must acknowledge that applying categorical labels to human beings or cultures can lead to oversimplification. Other important variables influence people's beliefs and values. Among these are socioeconomic status, level of formal education, and rural/urban experience. There is great diversity within any culture, and an individual may vary from situation to situation and from one point in his or her life to another.

Criticisms of the framework notwithstanding (see Greenfield et al., 2006), we have found it to be an excellent starting point in moving educators toward understanding that differences in underlying value systems may be associated with certain cross-cultural conflicts in the school (Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, Hasan, & Rothstein-Fisch, 2001). The framework is concise: many important features of cultures can be understood as clustering together to represent an individualistic or collectivistic perspective. It is also generative in that this relatively simple framework can be used to create an almost endless number of new practices in conjunction with learning about children and their families. Most important, the framework is non-judgmental. No particular set of cultural values is characterized as right or wrong; rather, the framework is a tool for recognizing important cultural differences. Use of this framework can be a cognitively meaningful enterprise, particularly when it helps educators distill the fundamental differences between U.S. dominant culture and many of the cultures of immigrant children and their families. Ultimately such understanding can make the teacher's task simpler because it makes the underlying implicit values of families and schools more explicit. The four researchers who began the Bridging Cultures Project hypothesized that if teachers found the framework of individualism and collectivism meaningful, then they would experiment with new classroom practices to make the culture of the school more harmonious with the culture of their immigrant students.

2. **The Bridging Cultures Project**

We present here a summary of the initial Bridging cultures research and findings because they form the foundation for the early childhood education and professional development discussed later.

2.1. *Participants*

Seven elementary bilingual teachers from the greater Los Angeles area who taught in schools with a large majority of immigrant Latino students were recruited to participate in the project. Four of the teachers identified themselves as Latino and three as European American. Four teachers came to the United States as immigrants themselves (two from Mexico, one from Peru, and one from Germany). All of the teachers were experienced, with between 5 and 21 years of teaching (average 12.7 years). They taught in all grades K-5, but the majority ($n = 5$) taught K-3, thus having a direct impact on students during the early childhood years. Children of immigrant families from Mexico and Central America comprised the majority of their classroom populations, and virtually all of the children's parents had limited formal education.

2.2. *Procedure and measures*

As a longitudinal professional development endeavor, the Bridging Cultures Project has had two distinct phases. Each phase will be briefly described here. (A more detailed description can be found in Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, et al. (2001); Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al. (2001).) Phase I consisted of three half-day videotaped workshops presented over a period of four months. The workshops included administration of scenarios of home–school conflict (see Raeff et al., 2000) as a pretest to determine the teachers' orientation to problem solving based on individualistic or collectivistic perspectives (the pretest and posttest data were coded by the same team member who had established inter-rater reliability on the empirical study using the same scenarios), learning about the framework of individualism and collectivism, elicitation of teachers' examples of individualism–collectivism in their own classrooms, and teachers' sharing of the changes they made in their classrooms as a result of their new understanding of culture in terms of the individualism–collectivism framework. At the end of the third workshop, teachers responded to an alternate set of scenarios.

In Phase II, teachers shifted their role as participants in professional development to that of ethnographic co-researchers. As a team, the staff researchers and teacher–researchers met every 2–3 months for several hours, typically in restaurants over breakfast and lunch. During these meetings, teachers shared and reflected on their experiences in conceptualizing and

trying out new classroom strategies informed by the framework of individualism and collectivism. Staff researchers and other teacher-team members supported teachers' self-selected ethnographic inquiries to learn about the values and beliefs of their students and students' families.

Also during Phase II, all seven teachers were observed on at least two occasions in their classrooms by the same core researcher (often accompanied by another core researcher or graduate student). Observations were scheduled during "typical" mornings, lasted 2–3 h, plus a debriefing interview with the teacher either at lunch or during a morning break. Over 40 h of observation field notes were collected during Phase II. Observations were completely open-ended, though the observer (the first author—and on occasion the second author) paid close attention to the features of classrooms identified from previous research as potential sources of home–school conflict (Greenfield et al., 2000; Raeff et al., 2000). The observations focused on the teacher but also included notes on children, as they interacted with the teacher or worked in small groups. If other adults, such as parent volunteers, were present, their roles and interactions were also noted. In addition, details of the classroom environment were documented, such as the content of bulletin boards, posted classroom rules, and seating arrangements.

All seven teachers were interviewed at the end of the third year of the project. The questions were designed to promote a deeply reflective review of the Bridging Cultures experience. Specifically, teachers were asked about the training workshops, goals they hoped to accomplish, examples of their innovations along the lines of the home–school conflicts (described previously), changes in classroom practices with children and families, professional development they offered to others on the individualism–collectivism framework, and responses to the project as a whole.

Semi-monthly meeting notes were also an important source of data, captured when the team of core researchers and teacher–researchers were together to discuss the teachers' evolving innovations. In sum, the data from Phase II included meeting notes, classroom observations, and in-depth interviews. The teachers occasionally called the core researchers to ask a question, clarify an experience, or retell an episode from their classrooms. These informal communications were noted as well, and could be brought up for discussion at one of the team meetings.

2.3. Results and discussion

The results of the Bridging Cultures Project (see Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008; Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Isaac, Daley, & Perez, 2003; Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, et al., 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001) indicate a strong change in teachers' thinking and practice. In Phase I (the initial three workshops), pretest and posttest data indicate that the teachers made a cognitive shift from a very individualistic orientation to a more balanced, collectivistic–individualistic orientation. Of the initial pretest scenarios, 86% were resolved in individualistic ways by the seven teachers. On the posttest, 57% of responses were collectivistic, 21% individualistic, and 21% both individualistic and collectivistic.

In the span of three meetings (spread over four months) the teachers began to make their implicit assumptions about immigrant families explicit and to move toward a much deeper awareness and understanding of the values inherent in collectivistic families as reflected in the videotapes and field notes from the first three meetings. For example, our field notes document one kindergarten teacher's reflections about the meaning of the framework.

It was a revelation that the parents weren't wrong, just different, because it never felt right to me to think they were wrong. But deep down I thought they were wrong and I knew that was racist and that was eluding me. Coming together [as part of the project group], it all made sense. It answered many of the questions I had.

In this case, the teacher seemed to have been wrestling with the tension between wishing not to see the parents as wrong, yet feeling that way, nonetheless. Without a framework to understand the explicit differences, she was limited in her thinking of parents as either right or wrong. However, the framework made sense to her and helped to answer many questions about the role of culture in child-rearing and education. Later she said, "Everything I've ever gone to about culture was about their cultures, and this is exactly [the] point: I have a culture, too, and it dictates what I do" (Trumbull et al., 2000, p. 20).

For the Latino teachers, the framework both validated many of their intuitive but unnamed teaching inclinations and also explained some of their own personal educational experiences. One said,

As an immigrant from Mexico myself I can see how I have had to fight my own collectivistic upbringing to be successful in U.S. schools. Those of us who jumped from one [cultural] orientation to another made the leap without even knowing it! Now we need to tap our cultural knowledge for the sake of our students.

In Phase II the teachers made changes in their classrooms, taking on the role of ethnographic researchers. The teachers each constructed their own approach to lessening home–school conflict for their immigrant Latino students. The changes were based on each teacher's own interests as they related to the needs of the children and families they served. They self-selected and targeted new approaches to communication with families (Trumbull, Diaz-Meza, et al., 2001; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001), parent involvement (Trumbull et al., 2003), classroom management (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008), students' motivation (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2005), and the organization of instruction and assessment (Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2003; Trumbull et al., 2000).

3. Making the implicit explicit

In each of the classrooms, changes were made that drew on the teachers' new knowledge. In essence, the teachers were learning to make explicit their own implicit knowledge and beliefs about schools, teaching, learning, and immigrant Latino families. Their tools for bringing what was invisible, embedded, and unspoken to light were observation, introspection, continued meeting and discussion with the Bridging Cultures group, reading selected journal articles, talking with families, and reflecting on all that they heard and saw. A few examples of the teachers' successful innovations are described below, including changes in practices with families.

3.1. Strengthening relationships with families

3.1.1. Cultivating opportunities for informal interaction

One of the first changes that the teachers made was to capitalize on opportunities to learn from parents in informal ways. Past research has shown that many parents from Latino and African American backgrounds favor informal and more personal relationships with teachers (e.g., Diaz, 2000; McCaleb, 1997). Once the Bridging Cultures teachers understood this possibility, new opportunities to connect with families naturally emerged (Trumbull et al., 2003). For example, one second-grade teacher made sure to chat informally with parents as they dropped off and picked up children. According to the teacher,

I take this opportunity to have mini-conferences with the parents. These conversations may never even deal with the child. They may touch on the weather or any other social topic. It may even be just a simple greeting. Yet I find that these interactions foster a closer bond with parents (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001, p. 77).

3.1.2. Rethinking open house

Another example of innovation is the way some Bridging Cultures teachers reconceptualized Open House. One teacher was explicit in inviting the whole family, telling the children that it was important for the entire family to be present if possible at Open House because she planned to take a family portrait. The photos served several purposes. First, they demonstrated that the teacher truly valued the family—not just the parents, but also the siblings, grandparents, and others. Second, the photos went up on the classroom bulletin board as a reminder to the children that their families were esteemed at school, something the teacher judged to be especially important for immigrant children as they adapted to a new school culture. Later, the same photos were loaded into the classroom computer and used as prompts for language and literacy activities. In subsequent meetings at school, families could see their photos with the children's work attached to them, attesting to their valuable role in the children's school life. The teacher reported that the children especially liked seeing their family on the classroom computer.

Another teacher, who conducts kindergarten orientation meetings, knew that for many Latino immigrant parents, answering numerous intake questions, even in Spanish, could be troublesome because of the limited access that many families had had to formal education in their home countries. Thus, she developed an "ethnographic chart"—distributing sticky notes to families and having them write their child's name on all of them. She posted several questions on large paper throughout the room and read them aloud in Spanish. If the response to a given question was "yes," then the family member would stick the child's name on the chart. Some of the questions read, "Is this your first child in school?" "Do you have any other children in our school?" "Do you read or write Spanish?" "Is there anyone to help with English homework at home?" "Would you like to volunteer in our class?" This strategy afforded many benefits. The teacher learned about the families, even as the families learned about each other. She did not stand in the front of the class and lecture to them about what the school expected them to do. Instead, she showed her interest in learning more about them.

It should be mentioned that at no time were any classroom strategies suggested by the staff researchers. On the contrary, we were careful to never be prescriptive in any way. Teachers created their own interventions or strategies, which they eagerly shared with each other at the periodic meetings. It never took long for teachers to make adaptations to their colleagues' practices and try them out with their own children and families. The group parent conference is one such example.

3.1.3. Group parent conferences

One teacher began to rethink student-led conferences, a popular way to engage children in describing their accomplishments to parents' as the families and teacher sit back and listen to the child (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). She reasoned that student-led conferences represent decidedly individualistic values: The child trumpets his or her own achievements, and the parents are left to listen to the child rather than hearing the teacher's assessment of the child's progress and working with the teacher to determine the child's needs and how to meet them. In essence, this method ignores the hierarchy of respect that is generally accorded in collectivistic families—that the parents' and teacher's role is to talk, and children's role is to listen. Recognizing that the collectivistic Latino immigrant families might not be comfortable with this child-centered approach, but might respond favorably to working in groups (just as her students had), the teacher decided to try something completely new: She experimented with small-group parent conferences, organized according to the English language levels of the students. One group conference was conducted in English, and two others were conducted in Spanish.

While the teacher did present information about expectations for academic achievement, assessment, and report cards, she also fostered parents' participation as a group. According to the teacher,

“. . . [A] comfortable and warm feeling came across during the conferencing. Many parents had questions that benefited others. . . This format provided a group voice for the parents rather than an individual voice. . . The conference design impressed my principal, who asked me to lead a staff development program on that subject. I see this conferencing format as an evolving process (Quiroz, Greenfield, & Altchech, 1999, p. 69).

An added benefit for the teacher was that she did not have to repeat the same information about assessments and report cards over and over again to each family.

During an interview, another Bridging Cultures teacher reported that because the group parent conferences were so successful, she tried her hand at them.

Everyone sat in the circle. . . parents, siblings everyone. . . When the parents start talking about themselves, they put themselves down. "I hope that my child learns better than I did, because I am not very smart." Other parents rushed to make them feel better and tell them something positive, and I stressed the importance of their work in the [strawberry] field – providing food for everyone and that it is the most important thing for us, period.

These two teachers' use of group conferences reflects several important features that seemed to be especially appreciated by immigrant Latino families. First, the teachers recognized that families should be included as a whole, with younger children, extended family members, and even the "drivers" who helped get them to the conference. Second, they understood the implicit need for group support, so they organized their sessions to have a "family-like" atmosphere. Nonetheless, they continued to maintain their professional role and to provide essential information to families, especially related to the children's formal education. The teachers used their knowledge of the collectivistic values of many immigrant Latino families to create a new, more parent-friendly format for conferences. This new format served to increase parents' feeling of comfort at school conferences, helped parents to gain knowledge from other parents, and allowed the teacher to learn more from the families.

3.2. *Independent versus group learning*

Just like their parents, many immigrant Latino children may prefer a group orientation to learning over an individualized one. We have seen this group orientation in children's inclination to help and share with others. A kindergarten teacher explained, "The children are always wanting to help their friends. . . Academically or in cleaning up, it was always there. I was conscious of not telling them 'don't,' but I didn't respect it or understand it" (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 83). After she learned about the cultural value system of collectivism, the teacher shifted her thinking markedly. She not only came to understand the value of helping but she consciously used it to support students' learning by telling them, "Maybe you can explain it better" encouraging the children to help each other. She reflected, "Instead of my doing it or another teacher, they can help someone else" (p. 83). In over 40 h of classroom observation, we saw countless helping and sharing behaviors—something the teachers came to understand and capitalize on to promote learning.

A common practice designed to bridge home and school cultures is to have children bring an object from the home to school and to share about it—describing it and explaining why it is important. "Sharing time" as it is used in the United States, often has the goal of promoting oral language skills related to expressing cognitive knowledge about objects, their use, and their properties (Michaels, 1991; Poveda, 2001). Children in Bridging Cultures classrooms were often reluctant to speak up in such situations. Their teachers reported that they seemed to be uncomfortable standing alone at the front of the class. Rather than maintain that individualistic approach, but mindful of the need for oral language skills, one teacher divided children up into groups. Each group of students would take turns sharing what they had brought from home. Having the proximity of friends and being part of a group seemed to reduce the children's discomfort with speaking in front of the group. Children looked at each other, as they approached the front of the room as a group and then stood close to one another, as each took turns describing his or her object from home. In this way, the goal of oral language development was met but within a context that was more comfortable for the child.

But allowing children to follow their apparently natural inclination to help and share had to be tempered with recognition of school rules, particularly when it came to testing—a uniquely individualistic enterprise. In one instance, buddies were allowed to support the learning of their friends; but when the testing time came, the teacher explained that sometimes children have to show what they know by themselves. However, she was quick to point out that after that solitary experience, they would be able to talk with classmates about what they thought were the right answers. In this way, the children were learning—as they needed to—that sometimes school requires individual tasks, but that there would still be times when they could support each other's learning in pairs or groups (Rothstein-Fisch et al., 2003).

3.3. *Special conditions of the Bridging Cultures study*

Before we discuss the lessons learned, we want to acknowledge some special conditions of the study. The Bridging Cultures teachers were extraordinary. They were well-established in their schools with many years of experience. The majority had earned advanced degrees or credentials (two with MA degrees and two as recipients of National Board for Professional

Teaching Standards Certification), and all were competent bilingual educators. In addition, they were self-selected for the project and described themselves as eager to develop new understandings that might improve their teaching.

A few features of the Bridging Cultures professional development are important to consider. The teachers were allowed to grow their own ideas in a supportive and non-threatening collegial environment (Hawley & Valli, 1999). In addition, they did not fear that their experiments in changing practices within their classrooms would be stymied by administrative obstacles because of the level of trust and support expressed by their principals. Teachers were also paid small stipends and shared meals in comfortable spaces. These features of the project were not trivial. Teachers told us that they were not accustomed to being appreciated in these ways. They believed that their expertise was acknowledged, and they felt valued.

4. The move from elementary to preschool applications

As we began to disseminate our findings from the Bridging Cultures Project (Rothstein-Fisch, 2003; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, et al., 2001), fellow researchers and foundations² became interested in how the framework of individualism and collectivism might inform teacher education and professional development for early childhood educators. Often a child's first point of contact with the "outside" culture occurs not in kindergarten, but in preschool—whether it be in a Head Start program, a state funded preschool, or a community-based program. Thus, we began to look carefully at the application of the Bridging Cultures framework and research to preschool education.

Early childhood educators may have a desire to "convince families that their home's cultural values and norms are valued," as the mission statement from the *National Association for the Education of Young Children* (2005, p. 1) states, but there are scant resources on *how to do so*. Though preschool teachers have a tremendous responsibility for making the school culture explicit for all to understand, they are often unprepared. Understanding culture is complex and can be overwhelming without a framework that can organize seemingly separate beliefs and practices. Teachers may believe that with several cultures represented in the classroom at once, they will need to learn everything about all of them—a daunting task. When asked how they respond to cultural differences, we have heard them reply, "I have so many children from different cultures in my class, I could never know enough, so I just treat everyone as an individual"—in essence a default to a solidly individualistic orientation, thus unwittingly perpetuating a dominant culture perspective.

When preschool educators and caregivers do make the attempt to explore culture, they may do so only at the surface level, focusing on food, historical costumes, holidays and heroes and fail to address deeper elements of culture like values, beliefs, and related differences in goals for child development (Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Moreover, if the staff do not speak the home language of children and families (and if the immigrants are not English proficient), then communication problems arise, making cultural demystification that much more unlikely. Cultural conflicts can also arise even when teachers and parents are from the same cultural and linguistic background because "expert knowledge" about child development presented in teacher preparation programs tends to be situated in an exclusively individualistic view.

A large majority of early childhood teachers "do not feel well-prepared to teach communication problems can also arise even when teachers and parents are from the same cultural and linguistic background because what constitutes as "expert knowledge" about child development and teaching may be based on the psychology of the individual students with limited English proficiency [or] from cultural backgrounds different from their own" (Early & Winston, 2001, p. 300). Even when the courses teachers take do address culture, they may not include more than a surface level introduction to culture, one that acknowledges it as important but does not offer an effective way of getting a grasp of what has been called "deep culture"—the level of culture captured in the individualism–collectivism framework (see also Hollins, 1996). Add to the mix the high turnover rate of teachers due to low wages (Whitebook & Sakai, 2004) and the consequent need to continually provide professional development as new teachers and caregivers enter the profession, and one cannot be surprised that many preschool teachers are ill-equipped to respond in an informed way to immigrant children and their families.

4.1. A resource for early childhood educators

With encouragement and some financial support from early childhood education advocates, Bridging Cultures researchers and colleagues created a professional development module, *Bridging Cultures in Early Care and Education* (Zepeda, Gonzalez-Mena, Rothstein-Fisch, & Trumbull, 2006). The module is one resource that has potential for helping early childhood educators understand and address the kinds of home–school conflict that can occur. Designed as a three-hour training module, the book uses the framework of individualism and collectivism to make familiar classroom practices understandable as cultural phenomena. One example from the book depicts a teacher trying to help a young immigrant Latino boy:

Each child in the preschool group is making a book called *All About Me*. The teacher asks each one to say what is special about himself or herself. The teacher writes the child's comment, and the child draws a picture to go along with the words. One boy responds to the question with examples about other people: His brother is very good at soccer and his father is very good at cooking. The teacher keeps asking the boy to describe qualities about **himself**, prompting

² We gratefully acknowledge the support of the A.L. Mailman Foundation and the Foundation for Child Development for the development of *Bridging cultures in early care and education*.

him by saying: “This is all about YOU. Are you smart? Yes, of course you are smart, so let’s say you are special because you are smart.” In the end, the boy’s book contains drawings with dictated sentences such as “I am special because I am smart, I am special because I am strong, I am special because I am handsome.” When the boy’s mother sees the book, she looks distressed instead of delighted, as the teacher had expected.

Why does the teacher think this is a good activity? What is the child thinking? What is the mother thinking? What is the teacher thinking about the mother’s reaction? (Zepeda et al., 2006, p. 19)

Early childhood professionals tend to recognize *All About Me* as a highly familiar activity and resonate with the goals of promoting the child’s self-esteem, developing the child’s unique identity, and having the child describe himself as an individual. Incidentally, these goals are strongly valued in schools. In fact, “self-awareness” is the very first goal of the *California Preschool Learning Foundations* (California Department of Education, 2008, p. 6). Some participants in our professional development sessions have also suggested that the teacher in the vignette above is trying to promote increased English proficiency by prompting the child’s remarks. Finally, many workshop participants resonate with another reason that the teacher in this scenario behaves as she does: She has to get ready for Open House that evening!

However, when workshop participants are asked what the child may be thinking, they tend to think for a moment and offer comments such as; “My teacher doesn’t like my family.” “I am uncomfortable bragging about myself.” “My thoughts and ideas are not valued by my teacher.” Thus the child may experience a completely opposite response to the teacher’s goal. Instead of feeling good about himself, he feels confused, hurt, and misunderstood. When his mother sees the book, she too may have negative feelings. “Why is my son being boastful, when I have taught him to be modest?” “Why does he show himself without the family?” “This is not how I want my son to think about himself!” Thus the child may experience a response that is completely opposite to the one anticipated by the teacher.

The final question was “What is the teacher thinking about of the mother’s reaction?” Early childhood educators again have no problem taking the perspective of the teacher. “That mother doesn’t care about her son’s feeling or his work effort.” “The mother doesn’t want her son to have a positive sense of self.” Or “That mother is trying to make her son dependent upon her and may need therapy to separate from him.”

During the workshops, participants discuss the scenario and come to understand how supporting a child’s development of self-concept is more complex than just telling a child he is smart, strong, or handsome and may vary culturally. Additional examples from the Module include ones having to do with feeding practices, use of school materials, and respect for elders. There are also cases related to children with special needs.

As a result of the three-hour Bridging Cultures Early Care and Education workshop, participants have indicated that they are able to grasp the individualism–collectivism framework, relate it to their own lives, and imagine how to apply it to early childhood education. But obvious questions linger. What do preschool educators do with what they have learned in the workshop? Do teachers return to their classrooms and make changes, as did our seven original teachers? Is a three-hour course of professional development (as intensive and stimulating as it might be) sufficient to disrupt long-held beliefs (implicit or explicit) and to prompt change? Can early childhood teachers take the individualism–collectivism framework and use it productively to identify and reflect on the implicit values of schools and families? And what is the role of administrators in facilitating change in teachers’ practices? One of the most frequent responses to questions about how to improve the workshop is “more time.” We recognize that some kind of follow-up with expert support, at least initially, is important, and we have routinely encouraged program directors and leaders to identify ways to build in follow-up at their sites.

5. Toward a consolidated approach to understanding culture

What lessons learned from the Bridging Cultures Project can be mobilized to produce early childhood educators who can optimize the positive impact of early childhood education on immigrant children and their families? In this section, we will identify the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of college faculty needed to undertake this task. We will address programmatic needs, including revamped college curriculum, professional development that includes teachers who themselves are immigrants, informed and supportive administrators, and inclusion of parents as partners in understanding their own culture and that of the school.

5.1. The role of early childhood college and university faculty

Early childhood faculty at colleges and universities should make the topic of cultural pathways in development a priority in many courses on human development. But for them to do so, they will need adequate professional development themselves. “Many institutions provide inadequate support for faculty professional development, creating the risk that faculty have insufficient knowledge of up-to-date research” (Hyson & Biggar, 2006, p. 301). Another barrier is the deeply ingrained notion that “best practice” or “developmentally appropriate practice” is universal and can be applied across all cultural groups. Teacher educators must ask, “Developmentally appropriate according to whose culture?” Welch-Ross, Wolf, Moorehouse, and Rathgeb (2006) warn, “In the field of early childhood education, research on how best to support children’s learning and development has been embedded in cultural ideological differences and long-held assumptions about methods and settings for child rearing and expectations for children, especially as they prepare for school (p. 392).”

Without explicit cultural frameworks, it is unlikely that college faculty will be able to help students become aware of cultural values and how these play out in early childhood settings. They need to become well-versed in the literature from the fields of cultural psychology and educational anthropology—literature that provides theory, research, and many examples of the role that culture plays in both human development and schooling. Many faculty doubtless grapple with cultural issues, negotiating cultural conflicts for themselves and their students. However, making an understanding of culture and the experiences of immigrants an explicit part of students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions requires more than personal experience and sensitivity. It depends upon a well-grounded curriculum, based in theory and empirical research that will ultimately help early childhood students understand the children and families they will eventually care for and educate.

Pre-service curriculum can provide ways for students to build foundational knowledge and understanding of cultural differences that affect child-rearing. College faculty have an important role in helping students understand and consider the implications of research on the ways schooling is experienced by immigrants, in particular on how dominant culture values are reflected in schooling practices as well as in judgments teachers make about students and families. Specifically, college students need access to (1) direct instruction on ways of understanding culture, replete with examples, (2) opportunities to observe in a range of classrooms, (3) fieldwork situated within many kinds of communities, (4) high quality mentoring in the field, and (5) time for self-reflection and discussion with others reflection. We believe that the individualism–collectivism model is one tool for helping early childhood students demystify culture.

Courses, such as Child Growth and Development, Family–Child–Community, Teaching Diverse Learners, Observation, and Fieldwork in Early Childhood, should introduce and explain models of culture, as well as how to develop and maintain an ethnographic orientation to learning about culture, that as we have suggested earlier, is cognitively meaningful and non-judgmental. This perspective is ideal at the pre-service level, integrating theory, research, and practices that will support explicit notions of culture in an ever-deepening manner. Of course, many college students enrolled in early childhood courses are likely to be already employed in early childhood settings, thus blurring the distinction between formal, pre-service education and in-service professional development. Regardless of whether teachers-in-training have already begun working with young children, they need to recognize that cultural understanding should be a transactional process. Such understanding entails mutual, ongoing learning between teachers and families about the cultures of home and school. It entails learning about how cultures evolve over time. For those educators who are immigrants themselves, it is important that they have the opportunity to tell their stories, hear others' experiences, and be supported in learning the academic skills needed to be successful in the field.

5.2. *The role of in-service professional development*

In-service experiences can build on students' foundational learning about culture while grounded in “real life” experiences, challenges, and solutions to cross-cultural conflicts. This happens best when professionals already have a background in cultural theory and application. However, in-service professional development has risks, particularly when participants are “forced by the administration to participate” or convey “palpable hostility” to the workshop that can be exacerbated by “lapses in communication with the administration and lack of administrative support for the effort” (Ginsburg et al., 2006, p. 189). In-service education must be designed to engage a wide range of learners, many of whom may be immigrants themselves. Instructors will need to provide multiple ways of participating in class, of eliciting participants' unique perspectives, and will need to be conscious of any status differences that could get in the way of an inclusive norm (cf., Cohen, 1994).

6. An example of in-service training based on the Bridging Cultures module

Early childhood audiences who participate in workshops based on the Bridging Cultures in Early Care and Education training seem to understand the examples of cross-cultural differences offered. One case stands out for us, a back-to-back, morning and afternoon training of three hours each for two groups in Los Angeles, California. We highlight these two trainings because they speak to the issues of the immigrant early childhood education workforce. The participants ($N=89$) were Head Start personnel, all of whom were required to attend. The majority identified themselves as Latino (52.8%) with Asian/Pacific Islanders (25.8%) and African-American/Black (11.2%) as the next two largest ethnic groups; 4.5% identified themselves as mixed ethnicity; and only 2.2% identified themselves as European American. The training was simultaneously translated into Spanish, and all written materials were available in Spanish and English. The majority of the participants had some college/Early Childhood units (32.6%) or had earned an associate's degree (34.8%). A smaller group had completed a bachelor's degree (28.1%). The remaining 4.5% represented those who had finished high school only, stated some other kind of training, or failed to respond. During the process of the training, we witnessed first-hand how professional development that targets the training at a mid-level of academic skill can be sometimes too basic for some participants and often much too challenging for others. For example, administrators clustered themselves at a back table and quickly tipped the conversation to what was seemingly on their minds—upcoming reports that were due.

Among the larger group of teachers, many appeared to be immigrants themselves, based on their preference for Spanish audio and written materials. Among those Spanish-speaking teachers, many seemed to have difficulty grasping the basic ideas within the scenarios (such as the one described earlier “All About Me”) that had already been read aloud and translated through headphones. These non-native English speakers were observed to use their fingers to read the same scenario very slowly and they seemed reluctant to participate in the small group discussions at their tables. These observations underscore

several concerns about professional development at the in-service level. First, just because information is translated does not mean that it is readily understood, particularly if it is new information, if it has a theoretical aspect, or if it requires academic skills that may be challenging for some of the participants. Second, professional development often comes as a one-time event. Most participants are likely to need repeated exposure to the concepts—and they may or may not get what they need from follow-through on the part of their co-teachers, directors or administrators, as we will see.

The majority of participants reported that the training was “excellent” or “above average,” despite the requirement that they attend the workshop, variation in their levels of education, and differences in their English language proficiency. On a 5-point Likert scale (1 as “very poor” to 5 as “excellent”) most participants rated the workshop as “excellent” (46%) or “above average” (30%). Likewise, most participants indicated that the usefulness of training for their everyday work was “excellent” (47%) or “above average” (28%). These numbers may have been inflated by participants’ general appreciation. However, it appears that some foundation on which to expand cultural understanding was established. Workshops on how to identify institute and build on cultural strengths could follow this kind of initial institute. They might expand on the application of the individualism-collectivism framework and establish targeted mentoring of teachers (see [Howes, James, & Ritchie, 2003](#)). Such workshops could be part of a program-wide initiative or a response to goals identified during an accreditation processes. Of course, each of these approaches requires administrative support.

6.1. *The role of administrators*

Administrators play a key role in making professional development available, accepted, and effective. Trying out new strategies that build on children’s and families’ cultural strengths acquired at the pre-service or in-service level may be impossible if administrators lack cultural understanding. In a national study of state administrators of early childhood programs, [Buysse, Castro, West, and Skinner \(2005\)](#) found that “early childhood professionals may lack knowledge of the cultural beliefs and values that Latino families from diverse background find important, and may lack understanding of the strengths and adaptations of a child-rearing system different from their own” (p. 147). Program directors or principals must value and support teaching staff – often from a wide range of cultural backgrounds themselves—in learning about cultural values in a non-threatening manner. According to [Buysse et al. \(2005\)](#) professional development would need to include knowledge and skills with culture, including language and learning activities along with an understanding of “child-rearing perspectives among families from diverse backgrounds” (p. 159).

7. **Helping families make cultural values explicit**

Families can benefit from opportunities to compare or contrast school culture to their home culture, however, it is unlikely that they will be able to do this on their own. [Pérez Carron, Drake, and Barton \(2005\)](#) found that immigrant parents pointed to their unfamiliarity with the U.S. school system, language barriers, and the feeling that they were not respected, as sources of frustration. Quite likely, unnamed and invisible differences in cultural values and beliefs contributed to their discomfort. Ultimately, responsibility for translating the school culture to families is likely to fall on the teachers or the paraprofessional aides ([Cooper, Denner, & Lopez, 1999](#)). However, all school personnel, from teachers to staff and administrators, have a role in making the school experience positive for families.

To answer the question of whether parents might benefit from Bridging Cultures education, researchers ([Chang, 2003](#); [Esau, Greenfield, & Daley, 2004](#)) developed a series of parent workshops specifically targeting immigrant Latino parents of young school-age children. Two kinds of parent education workshops were offered to parents with children in grades 1–4. Parents were randomly assigned to one of two workshops: a district-based “standard” set of workshops concentrating on how parents could help improve their child’s academic achievement through homework, rewards, and incentives, with an emphasis on district expectations for parents. In contrast, the Bridging Cultures workshops were based on the framework of individualism and collectivism with the goal of making school practices and policies more explicit to parents. Six sessions were conducted with the “standard” group ($n = 13$) and six with the Bridging Cultures group ($n = 12$). All 12 workshops were conducted in Spanish by the same Bridging Cultures teacher.

Analysis of the videotapes of all 12 workshops revealed that parents in both groups had an increased awareness of school culture. However, parents’ own values were especially validated in the Bridging Cultures workshops, as parents reflected on their own upbringing. “In Bridging Cultures, parents came away with more complex skills, such as being able to draw deep connections between their personal lives and the school, and resolve conflicts in their relationships” ([Chang, 2003](#), p. 37). Through the Bridging Cultures workshops, parents were encouraged to help make their expectations, as well as those of the school, clearer to their children. In comparison with the standard workshop group, Bridging Cultures parents significantly increased their visitation to the teachers, indicating an increased level of communication and comfort with the school.

These findings indicate that Bridging Cultures parents improved their communication with the school and gained important explicit information about *why* schools do the things they do. Though there is no research on the long-term effects of the workshops, it appears that these workshops have great potential for exposing the culture of the school, for giving parents the opportunity to share their family values and beliefs with school personnel, and for making the home and school rules more explicit for families and students. Similar workshops seem highly worthwhile for families about to transition their children from preschool to elementary school. Simply stated, teachers need to know more about immigrant families and immigrant families need to know more about schools. The Bridging Cultures framework seems helpful in regard to both needs.

8. Concluding thoughts

We believe there is abundant evidence that for schools to be ready for children, they must consider culture and its role in human development and schooling. This is critical especially for immigrant children and their families. Bradley and McKelvey (2007) point out that “education is often slow to accommodate to the unique needs and styles of the newcomers” (p. 157) and that there are limited resources and programs “to support immigrant children and their families” (p. 161). The Bridging Cultures Project approach to professional development has been highly successful with elementary teachers and has shown promise with preschool educators. Many of the practices that the Bridging Cultures teachers created, such as those related to parent involvement and group learning, are among practices recommended for all school settings; yet if they are to be carried out effectively, cultural knowledge must be brought to bear. Not all children (or practitioners, as we have seen) learn best via the same kind of instructional formats. Not all parents can be involved in the same ways. But understanding the interplay of culture, child rearing, development, and learning can benefit teachers, students, and families trying to understand how to negotiate between values of home and school.

Although Latino families enroll their children in early childhood settings at half the rate of African American or European American families (Matthews & Ewen, 2006), when they do enroll them in high quality programs, there are beneficial outcomes (Hernandez et al., 2008). We surmise that if immigrant Latino children and their families had sustained support for acceptance and use of their “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Greenberg, 1991), in this case, for their collectivistic values and associated skills, then long-term benefits could be optimized. Consider what school might be like if the implicit aspects of culture were made explicit to teachers right from the start and if the immigrant child had a series of teachers in educational settings who understood this and built on each others' efforts, one to the next from preschool to elementary school.

Early childhood education is fertile ground for growing cultural understanding with the potential for being a positive first encounter with mainstream school values for immigrant children and their families. For many immigrant families, this may be the first time a non-relative, with values and socialization beliefs different from those of the home, cares for the child. Cultural conflicts can occur over feeding, sleeping, toileting, separation, and play (Greenfield et al., 2006; Zepeda et al., 2006). Without explicit knowledge on the part of caregivers and teachers, the youngest children are likely to be torn between socialization practices of home and those of the early childhood program.

Early childhood educators are likely to establish close connections to families, something that is much easier to accomplish with smaller class sizes and less formality than elementary settings afford. Relationships with families are seen as central to early childhood education, as stated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Professional Standard 2, requiring that: “Candidates know about, understand, and value the importance and complex characteristics of children’s families and communities. They use this understanding to create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support and empower families and to involve all families in their children’s development and learning” (Hyson, 2003, p. 79).

Preschool educators and administrators are also critical to children’s transition to elementary school (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). When they are equipped with models for understanding cultural differences, they can serve as critical brokers in addressing possible cross-cultural issues in children’s transition to the more formal elementary school. They can accomplish this through coursework and in-service workshops that make public school culture visible, and they can work with elementary school teachers in a shared understanding of cultural values, such as the differences between values associated with individualism and those associated with collectivism.

However, if early childhood educators are to increase their cultural understanding of immigrants, they will need pre-service and in-service education that addresses culture at a deeper level than is often the case. They will also need administrative support to build programs that welcome newcomer families, who often require active outreach (Buyse et al., 2005; Hernandez et al., 2008). Ultimately, we need more research on adult learning about cultures, along with systematic research about children living in immigrant families, and a closer look at the differences between immigrant children that do or do not attend preschool. Making implicit cultural values explicit is one important way early childhood professionals can begin a process that may ultimately improve development and learning for millions of children in the United States.

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