



## Cultural Competence for Teachers

### What?

Iowa is changing! Between 1990-2000, about two thirds of Iowa's population growth was due to immigration. "In 1990, there were 43,316 foreign-born people in Iowa or 1.6% of the state's total population. By 2000, there were 91,085 (3.1%) foreign-born residents. . . . Between 1995 and 2,000, the Census Bureau estimates that more than 28,000 foreign-born people arrived in Iowa directly from their home nation" (Grey, p 4). "Most of the immigrants were Latino with the largest group (61,154 or 74%) coming from Mexico. Others came from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, Panama and other Latin American countries." (Grey, p 5) "Latinos are now Iowa's largest minority population and outnumber African Americans by more than 20,000" (Grey, p 4) .

"According to the Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services, refugees settled in Iowa came from Sudan, Ivory Coast, Somalia and other African nations, Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union, Vietnam, Cambodia and other parts of Southeast Asia, Iraq, Haiti, Cuba and Bosnia and other places in the Balkans. . . . Between 1997 and 2002 alone, 7, 441 refugees were settled in Iowa with the most (5, 383) coming from the former Yugoslavia." Several thousand more refugees came to the state as "secondary migrants" who were initially resettled in other states but then moved to Iowa (Grey, p 5).

There is a distinction between immigrants and refugees. "Refugees are forced to leave their home countries because of war, environmental disasters, political persecution and/or religious or ethnic intolerance. They come to the United States with a special immigration status that gives them automatic admission into the country and eases their reunification with family members. This status also provides them with a "green card" or work authorization permit. In addition, short-term financial assistance is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through private and state agencies like the Iowa Bureau of Refugee Services. Refugees are "invited" to live in the United States to start a new life" (Grey, p 5).

"Immigrants generally come to the U.S. for one of two reasons; they are joining family members who already live in this country, or they are "economic immigrants" seeking work and a better life for themselves and their families" (Grey, p 6).

Families who come to Iowa from different countries may have similar or different educational levels, economic status, racial, and cultural backgrounds. Some may have had experiences with educational systems similar to Iowa's whereas others may have had no exposure to a formal system of education. Some other ways families from different cultural backgrounds may be alike or different include the following:



- Competition (some cultures avoid personal competition and in others it is important to prove oneself in competitive situations),
- Time (some families may come from cultures in which time is a relative concept and deadlines are flexible; others may believe that deadlines and commitments are firm),
- Decision making (in some families, the father makes all of the decisions and in others, the mother makes decisions regarding the children and home) (National Center for Family Literacy, III-6).

Child rearing practices, expectations of children, beliefs about appropriate developmental goals, and views about needing and accepting “help” from non-family members are additional factors that may be similar or different (Hepburn, p 7).

All of these factors can cause a disconnect between what educators think are viable parent involvement activities and how parents perceive them. “The following are examples of commonly heard complaints from teachers and administrators regarding parent involvement efforts with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds:

- “We always send fliers home, but no one ever shows up at our workshops or PTA meetings.”
- “Do you believe it? When I asked for a parent to come to school to discuss her daughter’s behavior, an older brother showed up.”
- “Can’t they take the time to teach their children the ABCs? Why don’t they send their children to school ready to learn?”
- “None of these parents value education. They never respond to our invitations to volunteer for school activities” (McCollum, p 2).

McCollum states that one reason this disconnect may occur is because “...educators in the United States tend to believe that parents should ideally be interventionists in their children’s learning” (McCollum, p 2). Middle class parents demonstrate that they value education and are concerned about their children’s learning by attending school meetings, volunteering for activities, helping their children with their homework and ensuring their children begin school knowing their numbers and letters.

Immigrant parents, on the other hand, often come from cultures where the proper role of a concerned parent is noninterventionist in nature (Bhachu, 1985). Parents from such backgrounds believe they should not intervene in the school’s business or question the teacher’s practices and expertise. Garcia found that most Hispanic parents felt parent intervention constituted interference in the affairs of the school (1990).

United States educators often do not understand that parents can actually place a very high value on education while not having a high degree of engagement with the school. While parents from diverse cultural backgrounds may not demonstrate the expected degree of engagement with the school according to middle class standards, they can



show that they value and support their children's learning in other ways," (McCollum, p 2) such as making sure children attend school.

Another reason for misunderstandings between parents and educators from different cultural backgrounds is parents' lack of understanding of the educational system in the United States. "They do not understand that they are expected to interact with schools in certain ways in order to demonstrate that they value education and want their children to learn. Parents who themselves often have had very little formal education, entrust their children to the schools and the experts whom they feel know better than they how to educate their children" (McCollum, p 3).

Although cultural backgrounds impact families' perceptions of how they can be involved in their children's education, lack of involvement may also be due to job schedules, and the lack of interpreters, transportation and child care. Poverty, as explained in the article on the culture of poverty, can also have a tremendous impact on how parents support their children's education.

## So What Does This Mean for Me?

Since one effective strategy for increasing student achievement is encouraging families to support their children's learning at home (Henderson and Mapp, p 7) and because No Child Left Behind requires a parent involvement plan for identified schools, many schools are developing such plans. Students in Iowa increasingly come to school from a variety of family backgrounds that may differ in many ways. In order to develop effective plans that will appeal to all families and produce results, educators and community team members need to become aware of their own beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding parent involvement as well as those of the parents they are seeking to involve (Ferrer, p 1).

Trail states that "Individual educators must appoint themselves as experts in their own districts and schools, working to build awareness and gather information about the impact of diversity that they deal with on a daily basis. Dr. Harold (Bud) Hodgkinson, director of the Center for Demographic Policy at the University of Texas at Austin, says, 'teachers and administrators must first understand what kinds of diversity are important to them to understand [because it] has an impact in their schools. In many cases, the race of a student matters less than the country of origin, the parents' educational level, or the socioeconomic status of a child'" (Trail, p.2).

The National Education Association's initiative to create great public schools for every child identifies as its first strategy *the enhancing of cultural competence*, which includes increasing the cultural competence of all involved in the school (NCPIE, p 5). The National Association for the Education of Young Children made a specific recommendation in their 1995 position paper, "Responding to Linguistic and Cultural



Diversity—Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education,” regarding the preparation of early childhood educators in the areas of culture, language, and diversity. The Association recommended that early childhood educators be prepared to “understand and appreciate their own cultural and linguistic background; reflect on how their cultural background affects how they interact with children and families; and understand the languages and cultural background of the children and families they serve” (Hepburn, p. 115).

Henderson and Mapp, in their 2002 synthesis of research on parent involvement, state that high performing schools “recognize, respect, and address families’ needs, as well as class and cultural difference” (Henderson and Mapp, p 7).

#### Questions for Reflection:

- What are my own beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding parent involvement? How does my own cultural background affect how I interact with children and their families?
- What are the parents’ beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding parent involvement?
- How to the languages and cultural background of the children and their families impact how they interact with me and the school?

## Now What Can I Do?

As teachers, consider the following in developing your own cultural competence:

- Form a group to write a family involvement plan. One of the first tasks of the group should be to study how the cultures influence the families’ perceptions of how they can be involved in their children’s education and what the research says are effective parent involvement strategies for increasing student achievement. Invite other faculty, parents, and if possible, a “cultural broker” or mediator to be part of the group. “A ‘cultural broker’ is one who bridges two cultures and can offer insights and knowledge where two cultures diverge and intersect” (Lunch and Hanson, 1998 in Hepburn, p 41).
- Learn about the cultures of students and families in your school. There are many ways to learn about other cultures including reading about the culture and talking and working with individuals from the culture. “In addition to books, magazines, biographies, local newspapers, community bulletins, etc., today’s electronic age allows sharing across the Internet, television, films, and video. Talking and working with individuals from the cultural group can support a more direct and open exchange of information with opportunities to ‘check-out’ one’s understanding of the meaning of beliefs, values, practices, customs, rituals, and events” (Lynch and Hanson, 1998 in Hepburn, p 41). The Grey and Hepburn books referenced in the resources contain questions that group members can



use to guide their study of different cultures and to reflect on their own cultural heritage and values and beliefs regarding parent involvement.

- Develop a set of questions in advance of talking with the families whose children attend your school. Hopefully, some will also be members of the group so everyone can learn and plan together. However, there will probably be some parents who will not join the group, so reaching them will be important. The questions in the list of resources and tools are examples. One-on-one conversations and/or small group discussions will probably work best rather than asking parents to make presentations or be part of a panel.

Consider, during these conversations, providing information to families as well as seeking it. For example, explain how Iowa schools are alike or different from the schools the parents attended. Talk about daily schedules and routines, behavioral expectations, attendance, grading and discipline policies, expectations for involvement and so on.

- Write the plan. After the group has completed their study of culture and effective family involvement strategies that lead to increased student achievement, you will all be prepared to write an effective plan. Be sure to promote the individualization of family involvement to meet the needs of the families you serve, just as you individualize for the students in your school.

**Tools:** Access the following tools on the Iowa Statewide PIRC (Parent Information Resource Center) web site at <http://www.iowaparents.org>.

- **Latino Achievement in America**, this PowerPoint presentation from Educational Trust (2003) provides information regarding the achievement of Latinos in the United States.
- **Sample Questions to Ask Families to Learn about Their Culture and Their Views on Parent Involvement**

Each of the following articles contains a point of view, written by individuals from the largest immigrant and refugee groups in Iowa, as well as an article on the culture of poverty. Each explains the country's or area's educational system and gives insight into the cultural background – the beliefs, values, roles, and relationships – that may influence parents' views of how to support their children in school. Think of these articles as “cultural generalizations,” shared by the personal view of each author. Each author's view point is influenced by how long they have been away from their home country, whether they were educated in a rural or urban setting – or during wartime, their own ethnic background. The authors' view points provide background



information for educators as they prepare for conversations with the parents of their students.

- **Culture Summary: Educating Children of Poverty**, this article compiles the key points from *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne (Author: Barbara Berry Whitley, Title III ELL Consultant for Western Hills Area Education Agency 12 and Certified Trainer of Aha! Process)
- **Culture Summary: Education in Bosnia**, this article summarizes parents' involvement in their children's education in Bosnia. (Author: Navenka Francic, Bi-lingual Case Manager, Success Program, Des Moines Public Schools, Des Moines, Iowa)
- **Culture Summary: Education in Mexico**, this article summarizes Hispanic parents' involvement in their children's education in Mexico. (Author: By Sarender Singh, SUCCESS Case Manager, Des Moines Public Schools, Des Moines, Iowa)
- **Culture Summary: Education in Southeast Asia**, this article summarizes parents' involvement in their children's education in communities of Southeast Asia. (Author: Mireille Golbuff, Success Case Worker, Des Moines Public Schools, Des Moines, Iowa and reviewed by Vinh Nguyen, ESL Specialist, Des Moines Public Schools, Des Moines, Iowa)
- **Culture Summary: Education in Sudan**, this article summarizes parents' involvement in their children's education in Sudan. (This article is under development.)
- **Culture Summary: Refugees**, this article summarizes the refugees in Iowa and their educational needs. (Author: By Jill Stuecker, Family Literacy Coordinator, Lutheran Services in Iowa, Refugee Cooperative, Des Moines, Iowa)

## Other Resources/Web Sites:

Bhachu, P. *Parental Educational Strategies: The Case of Punjabi Sikhs in Britain*. Research Paper 3 Center for Research in Ethnic Relations, University of Warwick, 1985.

**Education in the United States:** Parent and family involvement are crucial to young people's educational success, but there are often barriers such as language, culture, and others that stand in the way of families' full engagement in education. These English- and Spanish-language materials from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation provide an overview of the United States educational system.



- English Version: [http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/YouthEd/ENLACE/Parent\\_primer-English\\_00287\\_03378.pdf](http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/YouthEd/ENLACE/Parent_primer-English_00287_03378.pdf)
- Spanish Version: [http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/YouthEd/ENLACE/Parent\\_primer-Spanish\\_00287\\_03379.pdf](http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/YouthEd/ENLACE/Parent_primer-Spanish_00287_03379.pdf)

Ferrer, Millie. "Parent Involvement—Cultural Variations and Perspectives." (no date)  
Available for download at: <http://www.cyfernet.org/training/parenthandout.html>

Garcia, D.C. *Creating Parental Involvement: A Manual for School Children and Parents Interacting Program*. ERIC. Document Reproduction Service No. ED 323273. Miami, Florida: Florida University, School of Education, 1990.

Grey, Mark, Woodrick, Anne, et. al. *The New Iowan: Cedar Falls, IA: UNI New Iowans Program and IPTV*, 2003. Available for download at: [www.bcs.uni.edu/idm/newiowans](http://www.bcs.uni.edu/idm/newiowans).

Henderson, Anne and Mapp, Karen. *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002.

Hepburn, Kathy. *Building Culturally and Linguistically Competent Services to Support Young Children, Their Families, and School Readiness*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004. Available for download at: <http://aecf.org>. (Select "search" on the aecf.org web site, and type in the title.)

Iowa Center for Immigrant Leadership and Integration  
(<http://www.bcs.uni.edu/idm/newiowans/index.html>): The University of Northern Iowa's New Iowans Program (NIP) guides and prepares Iowa communities and businesses as they accommodate immigrant and refugee newcomers living and working in Iowa.

Iowa State University Extension. *Module II Cultural Perspectives on Parenting in Partnering with Parents*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State Extension, 2002.

Iowa State University Extension. *Module VIII Guiding, Nurturing, and Motivating Children in Partnering with Parents*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State Extension, 2002.

McCollum, Pam. "Issue: Immigrant Education: Obstacles to Immigrant Participation in Schools." *IDRA Newsletter*, 1996. Available for download at: <http://www.idra.org/newsltr/1996/Nov/Pam.htm>

National Center for Family Literacy. *Practitioner Toolkit: Working with Adult English Language Learners (ELLs)*. 2003.) Available for download at: <http://www.famlit.org/Publications/Practitioner-Toolkit-ELL.cfm>



National Coalition for Parent Involvement. "Closing Achievement Gaps: An Overview of the National Education Association's Initiative to Create Great Public Schools for Every Child," in *Education Update*, March, 2005. Available for download at:

[www.ncpie.org](http://www.ncpie.org)

Rodriguez, Victor Javier. "Diversity Training Improves Intercultural Communication Skills." *SEDL Newsletter*, Vol. XII #2, December, 2002. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Available for download at:

<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedletter/v12n02/2.html>

Trail, Kathleen. "A Changing Nation: The Impact of Linguistic and Cultural Diversity on Education." *SEDL Newsletter*, Vol. XII #2, December, 2002. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Available for download at:

<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedletter/v12n02/2.html>

**Welcoming New Iowans** (<http://www.bcs.uni.edu/idm/newiowans/handbook.htm>): This site provides access to several publications that may be helpful to schools and communities as they build respect and tolerance for new immigrants and refugee newcomers. Publications include the following:

- Welcoming New Iowans: A Guide for Citizens and Communities
- Welcoming New Iowans: A Guide for Managers and Supervisors
- Welcoming New Iowans: A Guide for Christians and Churches
- Welcoming New Iowans: Companion Text for PBS's New American Series