

## Chapter 5

# UNDERSTANDING CULTURALLY DIVERSE PARENTS AND TEACHERS

*Often our idea of cultural competence is understanding families so we can change them, so they are more like us, and that's not what cultural competence is all about. . . . We really need to be aware of our tendency to attribute our personal motivations to the behavior of others. . . . As a family support professional [cultural competence] is the ability to understand the effect of culture on child rearing and family relationships, and the ability to tailor my behavior accordingly. At the organizational level, it has to do with inclusion, responsiveness and equity. . . . This emphasis includes acknowledging the contribution of all people, the celebration of differences, the recognition of similarities, and a clear commitment to seeing differences as differences not deficits."*

—Blanca Almonte (1995/1996, p. 5)

### **Some of the questions this chapter addresses:**

- How do professionals working with families become culturally competent?
- What do professionals need to do personally before they can understand the diverse families they serve?
- What other factors, such as education, home or work environment, or social class, should professionals be aware of that might interact with a family's culture to predict parent behavior?
- How can schools learn more effectively from culturally diverse families?

Cultural issues are addressed throughout this book, not simply in this chapter. However, having put forth the theoretical and research findings on the parenting process and on the needs of parents as lifelong learners, such as the need to bring in their own experiences and engage in critical reflections, it is very important to extend the discussion to take into account different cultural contexts.

In this chapter, the dynamic nature of culture is discussed first. Suggestions are put forth as to how educators should learn about the diversity within and among the families with whom they work. We will discuss concepts such as the content and quality of parents' ideas about their own roles and about children. Then you will have an opportunity to ask yourselves a series of questions about your ideas and beliefs concerning parents, children, and families that all professionals working with families should ask themselves. Some of these questions may be especially helpful with particular parents. These include questions about parents' beliefs about children, children's needs, and child rearing. Other questions focus on parents' goals, preferred behavioral practices, and the impact of the environment on parents.

## WHAT IS CULTURAL CONTEXT?

### ■ How Do Professionals Working With Families Become Culturally Competent?

Effective teaching and family support involve trying to understand a particular person's or audience's complex cultural background while at the same time not denying the uniqueness of that person or group. The goal is *cultural pluralism*, which is "the notion that groups should be allowed, even encouraged to hold onto what gives them their unique identities while maintaining their membership in the larger social framework" (Gonzalez-Mena, 1997, p. 9).

#### A Practitioner's Reflection

To address this challenge in my own work and to prepare to teach a graduate course titled Parenting in Cultural Context, I read about cultural competence (e.g., Bavolek, 1997; Lipson, Dibble, & Minarik, 1996; Greenfield & Suzuki, 1998; Lynch & Hanson, 1998, 2004; Family Resource Coalition, 1995–1996) and reread a wonderful book titled *Development According to Parents*, by Goodnow and Collins (1990). I now have more questions than before and few easy answers.

I also reflected on my own experience as a parent trying to integrate the beliefs from my Scottish, Irish, and Italian traditions with rearing my children in North America. I learned that one's culture should be seen as a resource for

growth, not simply a static reference or historical fact. Culture is a dynamic, changing system. Just reading about history and traditions isn't enough. Those we serve continue to cocreate their cultures. We need to look for *meaning*: the meaning of people's behavior in terms of their cultural background as well as their developing cultural identity. We also must think about *diversity within diversity*, or the complexity of an evolving cultural identity affected by the immigration experience (is the parent a refugee or here in search of adventure, a better life, or something else?), socioeconomic status, rural versus urban experience, level of trauma, possible unresolved grief, spirituality, religious practices and traditions, and gender, to name just a few factors. We must not see parents as cultural stereotypes. We must look at history, but it will help us understand only a part of their cultural context.

As Cross (1995/1996, pp. 2–7) noted, we must think about the parents' cultural group's history with the current mainstream culture in which they live. For many, this history includes years of systematic oppression; for others it includes genocide and having children taken away from their families and placed in government boarding schools; for some it means wars, boundary changes, and changed status in one's own country of origin; for yet others it means exclusion laws and discrimination. In addition to considering the impact of these past experiences on a parent, we must honor the significant contributions made by each cultural group to the mainstream culture through the strength and courage of facing these hardships. We must learn history to inform present and future relationships, not to stereotype others. A parent at the Telpochcalli School described why she became part of a parent writing group:

We write our stories so that our children—some of them born here—will know where they come from and what their roots are. We also write so that our children realize the effort and sacrifice we have to make as parents to make the decision to come to an unknown country, with a different language and lifestyle; and so that they understand everything we have to confront to survive and obtain a better quality of life than that which we had in our country. (Hurtig, 2005, p. 257)

To learn more about diverse parents, we educators and practitioners must spend time with strong, healthy people of their cultures as well as with parents who do not have the same personal resources. We cannot rely on the media, an occasional workshop, or our own perceptions or experiences of persons of a particular culture. Cultural guides willing to help people understand what they see should also be engaged. Literature (both nonfiction and fiction) by persons of different cultural backgrounds is another important element in this process, as are cultural events of

the parents and families served. As Cross notes, seeing values and leadership in action in parents and families is essential. Finally, we must learn how to ask questions in sensitive ways. Those we ask would be considered experts in their own experience, not representatives of a whole group. The parents of a particular cultural group may be very different from one another in terms of their personalities, their urban or rural background, and their degree of *acculturation* (adjusting behavior according to the rules of a new culture without giving up the identity and customs of their culture of origin) or *assimilation* (taking on the identity and customs of the dominant culture). And I would hope that educators won't forget the history and legacy of North Americans like Jane Addams, who worked tirelessly to preserve the diverse cultural identities of immigrants like my own grandfathers, who came to Chicago decades ago and found people at Hull House to support them.

Many are uncomfortable with books about the way Latinos or African Americans tend to act or feel about things. It is much more helpful to learn about various cultural groups to broaden one's thinking and know the range of possible parent contexts, beliefs, and behaviors for every parent. Then we can avoid defaulting to our own beliefs regarding proper parenting. Building on Goodnow and Collins (1990; Goodnow, 2002) and other research cited in this book, I developed the questions in the next section to help parents think about aspects of their beliefs, roles, and relationships. I hope they can be a useful resource in the educator's ongoing search for cultural competence.

## TERMS AND QUESTIONS THAT AID OUR UNDERSTANDING

Many find it helps to focus on the content and quality of parents' ideas. By ideas, Goodnow and Collins (1990) mean parents' thinking, but they do not exclude the actions and feelings associated with those ideas. They explain that *content* has to do with the substance of parents' ideas (in all cultures, we can look at parents' goals or standards for their children). For example, they found in one set of studies that the emphasis in child rearing for Japanese parents tended to be on "setting the child on a proper course." They found further that "Japanese writers thought educational intervention to be necessary to keep the autonomously developing child on the morally right course from the standpoint of adult society" (p. 22). They needed parental practices that guided the child in the right direction and encouraged self-regulation in the maintenance of that direction. On the basis of this research example, we can ask any parent, do you believe your child needs adult guidance in developing self-regulation? In addition, many cultures see children as being born independent and needing to become interdependent and

socially responsible (Holden & Ritchie, 1988), which is different from the view of many Western societies that children need to become more independent over time.

*Quality*, according to Goodnow and Collins (1990), “refers to characteristics that may cut across content: characteristics such as the degree of certainty and openness to change, the degree of accuracy or elaboration, the degree of interweaving with other ideas, or the degree of consistency between verbal statements and other actions” (p. 9), and the degree of agreement between a child’s parents. This takes on special significance if people are in a new environment. My Italian immigrant grandfather Donato often spoke of being the “boss.” In Italy, his family relations were quite hierarchical, and children had to fit into the adults’ activities (see, e.g., New, 1988). In fact, in his own actions (more than his words), he deferred to my grandmother and his Americanized children and grandchildren to make many family decisions and was open to being influenced by them. Changed behavior can precede verbalized ideology or follow it. For example, in my work in Chicago with fathers in the 1980s and 1990s, upper-class fathers talked about changed family roles more than they actually took on new roles, whereas poor fathers did not “talk the talk,” but because of their wives’ need to work while the children were home, these men were actually redefining their own fathering in their actions.

*Ideas Regarding Directions of Child Development.* These questions cover parents’ goals, expectations, and timetable of change in terms of stages or phases of a child’s development. Goodnow and Collins (1990) propose we ask the following questions:

Is childhood seen as a time to be endured until one reaches the pleasures of adulthood . . . ? Or is it a time to be enjoyed, a period of relative license before one takes up the inevitable hardships of adulthood? “Let them play while they can,” in effect or, in the words of a Lebanese born mother in Australia, commenting on whether her 10-year old daughter had any specific household tasks: “Why should she? She’ll get lumbered with them soon enough.” (p. 26)

Think about the usual school advice that giving children chores is a good thing. What is the meaning of chores for the parents in your school? It has been found (Goodnow & Collins, 1990, p. 27) that some parents in some contexts believe that their children will just know or learn what to do (*role theory point of view*), and others feel the need to teach skills such as household tasks early on so that children will be prepared and have the right attitude when they assume various roles (*trait theory point of view*).

*Ideas in Terms of Parenting Conditions.* Goodnow and Collins (1990) suggest that the following questions might be asked: What do parents think about the impact

of heredity versus environment, effort versus luck, the potential for parents to influence others, the responsibilities of parents, and the range and effect of methods parents should use to accomplish their goals? If parents think the outcome of parenting is mostly about luck, they might not try to have an impact.

Heath's description of rural black families in the United States (as cited in Goodnow & Collins, 1990, p. 41) is very informative in terms of their perceived parental responsibilities and strategies to maintain their unique and valued family identity. Parents consciously sought "to fix and stabilize the identity of individuals as members of their own group and as outsiders to others' cultural groups" (Heath, 1990, p. 499). They read newspapers together and retold stories, with children sharing in the narrative, not just passively listening to an adult. It was a communal, not hierarchical, experience. This is an action that demonstrates goals and perceived needs of children. Professionals can now ask, for all parents with whom they work, what is the importance, use, and function of storytelling in their families? Those working with Native American parents know that in answer to a student's questions or in response to a child's behavior, parents and grandparents often tell a story (Philips, 1983, pp. 112–115). Educators can help students and future practitioners understand and appreciate this approach to socialization, communication, and connection.

## THE ROLE OF STORIES IN CULTURAL IDENTITY

The importance of stories is articulated in the research of Samara and Wilson (1999):

Some of the greatest and accessible assets families have are their stories that root children's cultural identities. The transmission of cultural values through the oral tradition has been an essential component of African American families' lives and has served to build a sense of continuity, belonging, ethnicity, confirmation of self-worth, and documentation of their faith and resiliency. (p. 502)

Hurtig (2005) demonstrated the impact that not only telling but writing their own stories had on Mexican American mothers. They better understood the value of their own personal experience, and they helped their children and their children's schoolmates and teachers not only understand their family history but also better understand their important role in parenting and in effecting social change for the betterment of all in their community. Hurtig summarizes one mother's story, "La fuente" (The Fountain), in which the mother beautifully describes a neighborhood fountain and park where families can find pleasure and no doubt thinks of her own childhood in Mexico, where she enjoyed such beauty with her family. The mother then makes the point that these kinds of safe and beautiful places are rare in her current neighborhood. In reading her story, we can imagine that it could be followed

by social activism to push for places “where our children are safer, places where they can practice their sports and recreate” (Hurtig, 2005, p. 270). Another mother’s story pointed to the way “one could find happiness as a child in Mexico without material things,” where children could use nature as their playground without safety concerns (Hurtig, 2005, p. 255). Many other mothers in the writing group also questioned the materialism of their present society, lamented the lack of safety, and were empowered by those stories to hold on to their values and, as caring mothers, to transform their new communities rather than assimilate materialism or allow their neighborhoods to continue to lack safe places for children.

Goodnow and Collins (1990) described Anglo-Saxon families as seeing “the family as a ‘launching pad,’ a base preparing children to move into a world of peers who will, in time, become more important than family” (p. 41). In contrast, parent-child ties in many cultures are often expected to deepen over time (although some parents whose children have not returned home since age 18 may view parents in those cultures as “too involved”).

#### A Practitioner’s Reflection

During my experience as a parent educator, I devised a program to use the value of enduring parent-child relations over the lifespan to help parents. In 2000, I organized a gathering for international parents in a school where I worked. One Italian family was struggling with criticism from American parents because the Italian parents wanted their daughter to attend Northwestern University rather than leave Chicago for an Ivy League school to which she had been accepted. The parents and I were able to help the family figure out a way to turn this issue into a win-win situation for all the family members and a victory for their bicultural identity. They did not have to abandon their values in this case. The student chose to stay nearby in student housing, attend this academically comparable school in the Midwest, which she had preferred despite her peers’ surprise, and visit home more easily when she chose to do so than if she had been hundreds of miles away. She told her peers that many diverse students would be at Northwestern and she felt her transition to adulthood would be easier if family were nearby. She valued autonomy along with closeness and interdependence.

Many professionals have worked with students or were themselves students who, as the first generation in an ethnic family to go to college, did not have as easy a time as this young woman did. Their families felt that their young adult children should stay home while in college and, when at home, should act as if family, not

homework, was the priority. Clearly, seeking to understand the values a family holds in areas like autonomy, dependency, and interdependency is very important.

Another case study reveals another insight often not considered in terms of cultural identity: Lena is a young woman whose parents had been in North America for her entire childhood. When they returned to their country of origin, they realized that they had reared their daughters in a much more traditional way than parents of their own generation back in their native country had reared theirs. For Lena's parents, traditions had stood still, and maintaining them was important for acculturation in North America. For their cousins back in Europe, cultural identity had been changing over the same period.

## SOME QUESTIONS ENHANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTS

Figure 5.1 contains questions developed on the basis of the work of Goodnow and Collins (1990) and other researchers. They are intended for use by those working with parents of diverse cultural contexts. Which questions one asks depends on what service or intervention is provided. Teachers, for example, might find half a dozen questions in the table that will help them relate effectively to particular school families, but the full list is provided to show how many things may make each family unique. Figure 5.1 also shows how these questions, or a selection thereof, might be presented to parents in a questionnaire format.

### ■ What Do Professionals Need to Do Personally Before They Can Understand the Diverse Families They Serve?

Teachers and other family-serving professionals should answer all the questions in Boxes 5.1 through 5.5 themselves in terms of their own children, if they are parents, or in terms of hypothetical children they might care for. Graue and Brown (2003) said it is very important for future and current teachers to answer relevant questions in anticipation of their work with families.

As you answer these questions from your own perspective, you may be wondering what is behind them. Is there a certain bias or socially desirable answer, such as "Negotiation is better than parental dictates"? In fact, many themes and research findings are embedded in these questions. It is hoped that the questions will demonstrate the need to find the meaning of certain behaviors within cultural context. Some of these questions echo the parents' ways of knowing or thinking styles discussed in Chapter 3.

Some of the areas the questions in Figure 5.1 and Boxes 5.1–5.5 tap into are the collective or interdependent versus the individualistic or independent approach to



Dear Parents,

As all of us plan for the coming school year, we would like to connect with you on an individual basis and learn more about your family and your goals for your children. Too often, parents and teachers assume they agree on goals and how to reach them, only to learn, when a problem arises, that they might not be in agreement after all. We ask you to share a little about your beliefs about your children's needs and your role in supporting them. This information, supplemented, we hope, by excellent family-school communications throughout the school year, will benefit our students and all the adults who care for them.

#### About Your Beliefs

1. What does your child (children) need from you to become a good and successful person? Be as specific as you can.
2. What do you look to the school to provide your child (children) to help her or him become a good and successful person?
3. Is it important to you and your child (children) to have time to play? To have unstructured time?
4. How have you found that your child (children) learns best? Give examples.
5. Do you think your child (children) needs homework? If so, why? If not, why not?

#### About Your Goals

6. What characteristics or attributes do you want your child (children) to have at age 18?
7. Do you have family traditions and rituals you hope your child (children) will continue? If so, please describe them.

#### About Parent-Child Relationships

8. How do you and everyone in your family who cares for your child (children) view your child's (children's) questioning of rules or asking for explanations of them?
9. How often do you think or worry about the environments your child (children) inhabits? Please answer: 3 (very often), 2 (often), or 1 (not often)

\_\_\_\_\_ Home  
 \_\_\_\_\_ School  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Peers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Neighborhood  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Society

Please add anything you would like to share about your child (children), her or his educational needs, or your family that you think would help us better collaborate in the coming year. Please use the reverse side if you need more space to answer these questions.

#### Figure 5.1 Getting to Know Our Parents

NOTE: This questionnaire can also be found on the Sage Web site for this book, [www.sagepub.com/mcdermottappendices](http://www.sagepub.com/mcdermottappendices), as Appendix A2: Getting to Know Our Parents.

life, intimacy and communication with children, self-efficacy in parents, goals for children, beliefs about authority and control, and the support parents seek, in addition to other situations in a parent's life that interact with culture to predict parent behavior.

### **PARENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT CHILDREN'S NEEDS: COLLECTIVE VERSUS INDIVIDUAL FOCUS**

Much has been written about *collective (interdependent)* versus *individualistic (independent)* assumptions about rearing children (see, e.g., Greenfield & Suzuki, 1998; Lynch & Hanson, 1998). Many children in the world are reared to be interdependent, meaning parents hope they will grow to be socially responsible. In contrast, other cultures believe that while children are born dependent, they need to grow to be independent. What are the consequences and correlates of these differing views? In collectivist cultures, children are reared to read parents' and others' needs nonverbally. The focus is on empathy; keen observation of others; group participation; sharing; duties and obligations to the family and group; and harmony, respect, and obedience.

If the parents also believed in Confucian ethics (Ho, 1994), they would emphasize obligation and filial piety to others rather than individual rights. In collectivist cultures, it would be acceptable for parents to give their children directives. Children would also know that parents would feel morally obligated to help them all their lives and remain connected to them over their lifespan. Emotional dependence would be expected. Children would expect to see their parents' love in their physical closeness and actions more than in explicit words such as "I love you." Likewise, children's obligation to listen to parents and support them would be lifelong. Chen and Uttal (1988) noted that in expecting family interdependency, Chinese parents would not neglect a child's individual intellectual pursuits. Intellectual performance is considered important to improve the self, and thus high expectations in this area are important in many collectivist cultures.

From the view of individualistic societies, the goal is not interdependence but independence, self-reliance, and self-fulfillment. The parents' goal is to help their child become autonomous, and often this means much verbal interaction, questions, and negotiation. An article titled "Safeguarding Wordless Voice in a World of Words" (Ohye, 1998) describes its author's reflections as a third-generation Japanese American mother reared with a collectivist family philosophy but rearing her own daughter in an individualistic society. While this subject has elicited a rich literature from many collectivist societies, Ohye gives us a particularly powerful demonstration of a dilemma many parents face today.

Ohye asks, "Will my children hear my 'voice' if I do not speak?" (p. 135). In the context of a U.S. society where more value is placed on the spoken word than

on reading nonverbal communications, such as a person's expressions, touch, or actions, it is understandable that parents might fear their children will not "hear" them or will interpret their lack of talking as lack of interest. Yet why should they have to give up their ways?

In the parenting classes described in Chapter 9, children as young as 3 and 4 are taught both how to read the nonverbal communications of others and to reflect on how others might understand their own nonverbal behavior. They are asked to consider what an infant or parent they are observing might be communicating in how they are looking at each other or touching each other or in what the adult is doing for the infant. The children are learning the meaning of varied communication modes that are important for human development literacy.

It is clear from Ohye's reflection below that the foundation for a strong parent-child attachment is, as discussed in Chapter 2, very likely to occur with this philosophy of parenting, which values attentiveness to another's needs:

I wish to suggest the possibility that a mother's "voice" can be heard without speech, that knowing another can occur in a context that does not emphasize speaking, and that my children will come to discern much about their mother and her heritage through silence. This silence is not that of a drowned or silenced voice, but rather is silence that is eloquent and resonant, embedded



Photo by Alfred B. Rasha.

With this parent's guidance, students learn to read nonverbal cues from an infant and other students.

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within a universe that steadily and powerfully directs one's attention away from the "self" to the "other." (p. 135)

This universe holds the ideal of knowing another through quiet observation and of being known by another without speaking. It is a universe of abiding trust in the other's capacity to satisfy one's wishes. (p. 135)

Finally, Ohye explores motivations for parent-child behaviors and the possible meaning of them today. One can see her own bicultural identity as she critically assesses what her children need to succeed, but she does not throw out all her own beliefs and values. She talks of assertion with respect. She critically assesses prior values (e.g., choosing a behavior to please the mother). She commits to becoming a guide for her children to negotiate their own changing world, but she does not relinquish all her values in the process. Ohye also shares that her daughter has come to feel entitled to explanations, to make reasonable demands, and to have her parents respect her personal autonomy. Ohye may feel frustrated by these expectations from her daughter, and this frustration is heard frequently from adult college students who are parents reared with more collectivist family values. It is also heard from parents reared in individualistic societies. Parents feel their children really do not understand how parents struggle with these expectations of them.

I did not relate to my mother's requests as something separate from her, as something that could be evaluated for logic and degree of mutuality. My mother's requests were my mother, and thus my actions were a direct statement about my feelings for her. (p. 144)

Think about how many times educators encourage parents to tell their child, "I love you, I just do not like your behavior." This is very difficult for young children to understand, and their cultural norms may make this advice quite strange to many parents also. A child's arguing with a parent's ideas is viewed as a potential rejection of the parent. Ohye also felt frustrated when her daughter and a friend were having a disagreement and Ohye asked her daughter how the friend might be feeling. (This important parenting practice of *inductive discipline* [Berkowitz & Grych, 1998; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967] is supported by educators concerned about moral development in children.) Ohye described her frustration as follows:

I felt trapped. I could exert my influence as her mother and answer in the way that felt congruent with my own upbringing and its emphasis upon maintaining harmony within relationships to others at all costs, and the attendant idea that pursuing harmony demonstrates maturity, tolerance and self-control. But it was quite obvious that answering would incur the loss of my daughter's confidence.

. . . Alternatively, I could . . . let her know that she had my permission to “take care of herself.” . . . I could sense that this was what she wanted to hear. (p. 145)

Ohye found it difficult to endorse an option that denied the needs of the other. Many educators (e.g. Eisler, 2000; Kohn, 1999; McDermott, 2003–2004, 2006; Noddings, 1984) have acknowledged with sadness that what the U.S. culture could learn from other cultures in terms of a more caring approach to living is being lost in a competitive system that seems too entrenched to change quickly enough for many. Yet caring is one of the skills that are needed in a global society.

Ohye provides another example: A teacher says, “Your child is so full of life,” and the parent wonders whether the child is drawing too much attention to himself or herself, because fitting in harmoniously is much more valued within the parent’s own cultural upbringing. While the teacher thinks the comment is a compliment, it is a stressful thing for many parents to hear. The following case study will elaborate. Maureen’s son Brendan and his friend Jay, who was a third-generation Japanese American child, told their parents about their dilemma in class.

Both got straight A’s in subjects, but Jay got a check for not speaking and Brendan got a check for speaking too much. Brendan knew his friend so well that he would speak Jay’s thoughts to the teacher. The boys thought they had a great system going that was built on their own comfort levels. Maureen had spent a lot of time encouraging her son to understand the feelings of his peers. The teacher felt Jay needed to speak more, so she penalized him for not doing so and penalized Brendan for speaking for him. Jay was just not comfortable speaking up. He did not want to put a spotlight on himself.

Ohye also shares her thinking about her changing parenting practices. How difficult it must be to support one’s children in an individualist society while regretting that they may lose sight of the communal values at the heart of their own parents’ upbringing and identity. As earlier chapters have shown, many educators today (Eisler, 2000; Kohn, 1999) believe Ohye’s values are of more worth than the values promoted in individualist cultures. It would be very helpful if discussions on these value dilemmas faced by parents could take place in schools and communities.

#### A Practitioner’s Reflection

In my own practice, I have spoken with Chinese American high school students in the United States who have experienced their parents’ support in terms of hard work to pay for a good school. While they knew in their heart that their parents cared for them, they could not help but feel sad when their parents were among the few who did not attend awards ceremonies or praise them for their

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accomplishments. The students understood the situation intellectually, but emotionally they needed their parents to respond to their successes differently, and yet they couldn't articulate their need to their parents out of respect for their parents' own upbringing and the value it placed on not drawing attention to oneself. My challenge was to help students come up with a way of resolving this situation that took everyone's needs, feelings, and beliefs into consideration. (We succeeded, by means of the caring process of relating discussed in Chapter 6.)

Ohye's experience ended positively and hopefully when a teacher informed her that her daughter, while self-confident and accomplished, was also sensitive to others' needs and rejoiced in their accomplishments. Ohye's reflective narrative clearly describes what goals she has for her children. It is very easy for teachers to assume that family goals are consistent with the goals of the dominant school culture. This is often not the case, however, and in fact the differences may be causing a good deal of sadness and concern for parents and students. Differences within culture are also ignored in the case of parents in the dominant culture who do not value grades, awards, and other activities that affect a child's intrinsic motivation negatively. These parents feel a similar sadness and concern when their values are ignored.

The questions in Box 5.1 are related to parental ideas and to cultural beliefs such as collectivism versus individualism. It is suggested that professionals ask themselves these questions and then think about posing some of them directly to parents to better understand their personal and cultural perspective.

#### **BOX 5.1** Parents' Beliefs

- To what extent does the family believe it needs to place the collective interests of the family above the interests of the individual?
- Do the parents believe the family should be characterized primarily by intimacy or by a certain degree of emotional distance?
- Do the parents believe it is important to work toward family consensus, or do they believe parental commands or directives are more appropriate for solving family problems?
- How much responsibility do the parents believe they have to influence a child's choice of friends, activities at school or after school, or other situations and so on?
- Does the family have beliefs about how conflict should be resolved?

- Do the parents believe in reciprocity?
- Which beliefs do the parents hold most dearly and yield most reluctantly?
- Have the parents you work with had an opportunity or a forum or place to think about their beliefs about children? About parents? About teachers?
- Are the parents able or willing to change beliefs or expectations of the child on the basis of new information they might receive?
- Are the parents' beliefs about parenting and children shared by others around them?
- Are the beliefs of parenting partners about their roles and children's needs similar to or vastly different from each other's?
- Do the parents believe it is acceptable to openly express caring by hugging and kissing children, or is there a different way to show love and caring within their family and culture?
- Do the parents believe they will have different amounts of influence on their children at different ages and stages?
- Do the parents have fairly rigid beliefs about divisions of labor in the family? On what are these views based?
- Do the parents believe it is disrespectful for a child to look adults in the eyes directly?

## PARENTAL GOALS

Rarely in elementary and high schools are parents asked about either their short- or long-term goals for their children. Early Headstart and Headstart programs (Gadsen-Dupree, 2006) and early childhood education programs more often intentionally ask parents about goals. They do so for a reason. One needs to know what the goals of parents from other cultures are and how they feel about discussing their goals. Much has been written on goals (Dix & Branca, 2003), and Gross's study (1996) from a nursing perspective deals well with general themes about goals. In an insightful article titled "What Is a 'Good' Parent?" Gross recommended that in a pluralistic society, one must look for a model of good parenting that is based on understanding diverse social contexts and parental goals. She begins with the obvious: "Constructs and models developed for a European American, middle class majority culture may not transfer well to other groups" (p. 178). In reviewing the literature on *parental goals*, she found some similarities, which can be a starting point for a discussion: "Parents across cultures share three primary goals: (1) to provide for their children's physical survival and health, (2) to provide children

with the competencies necessary for economic survival in adulthood, and (3) to transmit the values of their culture (LeVine, 1988)” (p. 178). If a goal such as survival is threatened, the others, such as the transmission of values, will be of less immediacy. Thus, some of the questions below about a child’s autonomy, questioning of authority, and trustfulness may not be primary to a family living in a dangerous neighborhood or situation. Not challenging authority and having a little mistrust might be necessary for survival. Gross describes a mother who ties her children to herself at night with a rope. When we learn that she is in a homeless shelter, we better understand her goals of knowing her children are nearby and safe.

Gross (1996) also noted that regardless of context, researchers (Taylor et al., 1994) have found that most North American parents want their children to “receive a good education, to be respected, to respect themselves, and to feel loved” (Gross, 1996, p. 179). But some parents want their children to be respected by teachers even if the children are not independent or self-promoting all the time, as was seen in the reflections by Ohye (1998) and in parents with whom many teachers have worked. Many parents have the goal of rearing children to be interdependent and deferent to authority. Children who are not competitive might end up being seen as less motivated by teachers. Thus, it is very important to ask questions about goals before school begins and in preservice education so that agreement on some goals is not wrongfully assumed.

Gross (1996) found some consistency related to parental goals. She concluded that in all situations, certain common factors should be present for all good parenting across cultures:

- The parenting goals are clear to the parents and children, and the goals support the children’s survival and well-being.
- The strategies are consistent with their parenting goals.
- The parents possess the knowledge and ability to adjust their child-rearing strategies to be consistent with changes in the child-rearing context and the parenting goals.
- The parents have the resources to apply those adjustments. (p. 180)

(One reason researchers do not always find positive and significant connections between parents’ goals and their behaviors is that parents may lack the knowledge and skills to achieve their hopes and dreams for their children [Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon, 1995; Price & Witchterman, 2003]. Some parents are not even aware of all their own personal resources to help children reach their goals. The family support principles essential to Head Start and other parent programs help parents develop those personal resources.)



These factors are consistent with the description of parental resources and social support in Chapter 3. The assumption underlying these factors is that parents have thought about their goals. Gross (1996) noted something that confirms the experiences of many educators: “Some parents cannot articulate their goals because they have not thought about their children in those terms, or the stress of daily life has made it difficult for them to focus on goals. However, many parents have never been asked” (p. 181). She cites Taylor et al.’s study (1994), in which parents of preschoolers were asked to think about what they would like their children to be like in 15 years. The parents were caught off guard. Gross added, “No one had ever asked them this question before. Some became tearful, but all were able to describe their hopes for their children’s future” (p. 181). A similar experience occurs in my work with culturally diverse adult college students and parents in my classes on Parenting in Cultural Context. Parents wondered why educators and other professionals had never asked them about their goals before.

The caveat of the four principles of good parenting is that some goals may not enhance a child’s well-being or safety. Some goals may not be compatible in new situations or environments. The kind of autonomy or responsibility given a child in a small village or in a rural area may not make sense in a big city. Professionals and other peer parents or community leaders may help parents evaluate goals in light of new contexts and times and see if their strategies for reaching them make sense. To illustrate, Shirley, a school counselor, was working in a school where a goal of newly arrived Mexican families was to have a family meal together daily. She described a family in which the father worked a late shift, so the children stayed up late for the family meal, woke up late, and came to the school as they had in their tiny town in Mexico: when they woke up. The school’s goal was teaching reading to all students at 9:00 a.m., and the students who slept late were missing their reading lessons. Without denying the value of either goal, Shirley had to help the parents discuss this issue with the teacher.

Goals and to whom they “make sense” is another point worth considering. It might make sense to a parent new to this country and a teacher that spanking is no longer considered the best way to help a child learn to make good choices, but the idea may be unfamiliar to the family. The school may encourage the mother to try alternatives to spanking, but it must also prepare her to bring this new strategy home to her own parents, parenting partner, or in-laws living in her home, who may have strong religious and cultural beliefs in spanking children and who often have decision-making power regarding the child in the family. Are we being hypocritical when we say, “We respect your culture, but don’t do that”? What should we do in this case?

What professionals in education want children to do in school may be quite different from what their parents think the children need to do in other settings, such as

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at home or in the community, and the professionals need to think more about this dilemma. Gross (1996) cited an example reported decades ago by Comer and Schraft (1980) of low-income North American parents who socialized their children to behave one way in school (thoughtful, reflective, and goal oriented) and in a different way when in a dangerous neighborhood (quick, impulsive, and action oriented). Do parents have different goals for children in different contexts today? Are teachers judgmental of or impatient with young children who cannot make the switch from neighborhood-community behavior to desired school behavior quickly enough? Most would also concur that we should rethink what skills are most needed on the street as well as in school, including a need to anticipate dangerous situations and think about goals and needs. Lareau's book (2003) about her time spent in homes with parents as they faced daily struggles like these is a must-read for helping professionals.

The model introduced in Part II of this book is consistent with Gross as well. In a caring model of decision making, parents clarify their goals and filter the information they might receive from leaders through their own goals, values, beliefs, and life situations. Gross suggests that parents' talking about goals "increases their confidence in their own ideas" (p. 182). She would likely be in agreement with findings of Belenky and her colleagues (1986/1997; 1997; 2000) and other researchers that some parents are just too stressed financially or mentally and physically to parent effectively or have these kinds of discussions immediately.



*Photo by Katie Montell.*

Parents meet in the beginning of the school year to discuss parent and school goals related to diversity.

Gross (1996), like Belenky and her colleagues (1986/1997; 1997; 2000), found that focusing on what parents already do with their children that is effective, and building on that, is the best route to parental self-efficacy. Often parents need to feel efficacious before they can even think about goals. Gross concludes her report by citing Berrera's wise advice (1994): "Come to recognize and respect a family's subjective world as it affects the behavior and development of a particular child—rather than to fit that world into what the assessor's professional community identifies as 'objective' and 'valid' reality" (as cited in Gross, 1996, p. 182). The questions in Box 5.2 can help educators understand the goals of their students' parents.

### **BOX 5.2** Parents' Goals

- Why did the parents wish to have children?
- What do they want their children to be like?
- How important is it that their children be obedient, loyal, independent, happy, healthy, and able to support themselves, observant of the family religion, not too different from most other boys and girls, not too similar, and so on?
- What do the parents want from their children?
- What do the parents want for their children?
- What qualities do the parents want to see their children develop?
- Do the parents have a preference for child compliance at all times, parent-child negotiation, or both at different times?
- Do the parents want parent-child relations to deepen or diminish over time?
- How would you assess the parents in terms of their willingness to grant rights and self-direction to their children?
- Do the parents have primarily realistic or unrealistic expectations for their children?
- Do the parents have past or current traditions and rituals that they wish to pass on to their children? What might they be? Are they ones with which you are comfortable? Can they be integrated into the curriculum?
- Have you asked these parents to describe their long-term goals for their child(ren) by listing the attributes they would like their children to possess when they are 18? (See Chapter 6.)
- Do they and can you distinguish between parent-centered goals, child-centered goals, and socialization-centered goals?
- Do they think about values and their relevance in making choices for their children?

## PARENTS' THINKING AND BEHAVIORS TOWARD THE CHILD AND OTHERS

In addition to goals, practitioners need to consider parents' thinking about their children and about the role of other adults in their and their children's lives. Some of these questions are related to family systems theory, introduced earlier. Christian (2006) describes six *family systems characteristics*, boundaries, roles, rules, hierarchy, climate, and equilibrium, that are important for teachers and family-serving professionals to understand. These family systems topics are discussed in detail in Appendix C3: Communication Newsletter—Enhancing Effective Communication in Home, School, and Community, found on the Sage Web site for this book ([www.sagepub.com/mcdermottappendices](http://www.sagepub.com/mcdermottappendices)). *Boundaries* refers to whether families are open to influence by others outside the family. Some families may be closed and choose to focus on family togetherness. Closed boundaries may involve choosing or controlling children's friends and activities. Special education is an area in which closing boundaries is often functional. Snell and Rosen (1997) describe the actions of the family of a special needs child, Shelley, as follows:

When extended family members chose to have a minimal contribution during crisis or their input was challenging or critical, they were emotionally and/or physically excluded from the activities of the family unit, were considered covertly or overtly, "out" and not sought for advice or support. This type of boundary defining can sometimes be a very painful experience. In fact the Donahues experienced the realization that there would be little support from either of their extended families as "more damaging" than Shelley's disability. In response to this lack of support, they circled the wagons tighter around the nuclear family unit. (p. 434)

Family systems theory often refers to *roles* different parents and children may have in families. For example, the oldest or female child might have the helper role. Some schools may see this role as being at odds with the student's needs to achieve personally. Usually roles are discussed in somewhat negative terms; for example, if one person in the family is the peacemaker, decision maker, placater, or problem solver, others may not learn these skills. On the other hand, decision-making, gender-related, and helper roles may be supported by centuries of cultural tradition and need to be explored very carefully.

In some settings, parents have experimented with different roles with much success. Getting parents to learn something new along with their children is a way to break down certain rigid definitions of authority many parents bring with them from their culture of origin.

**A Practitioner's Reflection**

In my work in Russia, I met a psychologist, Dr. Viktor Semenov, of the Center for Diagnostic Consulting, who brought parents and their children to the Tretyakov Art Gallery, where they learned a new project together in music, art, sculpting, or some other medium. In this experience, parents were connecting with children in nonhierarchical ways and feeling they were affecting their children positively in a society where they usually felt they had little impact.

*Rules* are also often culturally based. Parents may disagree with schools on rules regarding children's not hitting children who hit them or rules about which parent or extended family member gets approached to solve problems or make decisions or gets invited to parent-teacher meetings. The related term *hierarchy* refers to who makes decisions in a family. As Christian (2006, p. 17) noted, many decisions are based on gender, age, culture, religion, or economics. She suggests that questionnaires sent to parents early in the school year include questions such as "How and with whom would you like information about your child shared?" (p. 18).

*Climate* refers to the environment of the family system. While physical environment figures in, the emotional quality of a family is also important to its climate and does not depend on economics. Climate often relates to beliefs about children and their needs, mentioned earlier. A child could be wealthy but feel "unsafe" and receive little emotional support from parents.

*Equilibrium* refers to a sense of consistency, even when change occurs. It relates to the importance of rituals, routines, and traditions in families (Doherty, 1997; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Many believe that schools need places for parents and teachers to meet to better understand change in their lives and, through support and collaboration, maintain balance and consistency for their children in spite of change. Questions for practitioners to consider regarding parents' thinking and behavior are listed in Box 5.3.

**BOX 5.3** Parents' General Thinking and Behavior Toward the Child and Others

- Do the parents go to their family for all or certain advice? Do they go to experts, books, and other sources outside the family for all or certain advice?
- Is it traditional in their culture for family members besides the father and mother to make decisions about the children?

(Continued)

**BOX 5.3** (Continued)

- Are the parents willing or capable of seeing a behavior as having several potential causes?
- Can the parents thus frame a problem in different ways?
- Have there been instances when changes in the parents' thinking have occurred, irrespective of personal or cultural norms?
- Do the parents prefer actions and nonverbal communication to words or reflections about behavior? Do the children need to hear what their parents think, or can they draw conclusions from the parents' actions?
- What do the parents do when they become aware of views regarding children or parenting that differ from their own?
- Is there a shared understanding of events or issues between parents, parents and children, other family members who have decision-making power over children, teachers, counselors, and other parents?
- How do the parents think about their family?
- What are some of the family's themes and rules?
- Does the family have some rules, too many rules, or too few rules?
- Do the parents have customs, traditions, and rituals they wish to preserve?
- Do the parents see their children as accurate and trustworthy sources of information?
- Do the parents look for and read nonverbal cues from their children or others?
- Where do the parents get their information regarding what children need?
- Do the parents seem aware of current formal theory and research (e.g., negative effects of spanking, positive effects of negotiation and discussion)? If so, do they accept it, evade its application, or challenge its validity?
- What do the parents do when there are discrepancies between what they expect children to do and what actually happens?
- Do the parents seek information primarily in anticipation of a problem or regardless of whether there is a problem?
- How does this family view the "outside world"? Does it establish rigid or permeable boundaries?
- Do the parents feel the need to justify their child-rearing decisions to others (e.g., their own parents, peers, siblings)?
- How do the parents think about, discuss, and define emotions for children?
- Do the parents take responsibility for assigning their children to various "niches," such as play, sports, ethnic groups, schools, work?

- Do the parents think or worry about the impact of various environmental settings on their children? If so, which ones? Home? School? Community?
- If these parents attempt to exercise authority with their children, what justification if any do they articulate to the children (e.g., appeals to reason, fairness, politeness, authority, or responsibility)?
- To what degree do the children's ideas match their parents'? If they don't match, where is the disagreement?
- Do the parents see themselves as advocates for their children?
- Do the parents see themselves as capable of meeting their children's needs?
- Do the parents see themselves more as observers or as actors in their children's life?

## PARENTS' IDEAS ABOUT THE NATURE OF CHILDREN

Often parents and teachers hold conflicting ideas about children. Thinking about why there might be disagreements or misunderstandings between parents and teachers is time well spent. As mentioned earlier, some parents believe that if children are safe and fed, they will develop naturally, without much parental intervention (an approach some teachers may view as neglect). This view is found more often in families of lower socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2003). Middle-class parents and many middle- and upper-class families of diverse cultural backgrounds believe their role is "conscious cultivation" to help their children achieve as much as possible.

Ironically, as Lareau (2003) notes, middle-class parents of many cultural backgrounds may so overstructure their children's lives that there is little time for spontaneous play, which poorer children and children in many other cultures tend to experience often. This is ironic because of the increasing appreciation of the importance of play and discovery in children's lives. As schools become more competitive and more focused on academic excellence, there may also be fewer opportunities for the inquiry-based learning that characterizes the preschool years and occurs in many cultures naturally. Rather than focus on impressing on poor parents the need to provide children with extracurricular activities, Lareau suggests that middle-class children may indeed be at a disadvantage because they are deprived of the time to interact with family and people of all ages that poorer and culturally diverse children often experience.

The following reflection makes another point about play that many teachers will find familiar.

**A Practitioner's Reflection**

When teaching a parenting class to students in Grades 5 through 7 in an inner-city public school, I invited a parent new to the community to come monthly with her infant to visit this bilingual class so that she could become integrated into the school in a meaningful way that focused on family relationships, which was more comfortable and of more interest to her than a lesson in early American history. The class is described in more detail in Chapter 9. Each month when the mother visited, students put a book in the infant's hands and then various toys. At first the baby learned about the object with his mouth. Infants relate to objects differently as they grow older, focusing more on the images and words of parents as they read stories to children. The mother admitted that until she came to North America, her infant had never touched a book or toy. The children were all sitting on the classroom floor around a blanket. In a culturally insensitive class, this mother would have been seen as deficient, but instead, these students learned that in her village in the Dominican Republic, children could contract parasites by putting a toy from the dirt floor into their mouth. The students were able to see how different contexts meant different parent behaviors. Over time, the mother became more confident that her child would not be in such danger here, and she ended up with more books from all the students than she could ever use. She also grew in her view of herself as a parent who cared about her infant's safety and was open to new information as well. The students learned that children could learn about the world simply by exploring their natural surroundings without store-bought toys. Dialogue on this topic is needed.

Box 5.4 is a list of questions to help us understand parents' ideas about children.

**BOX 5.4** Parents' Ideas About Their Child and the Nature of Children

- Do the parents see value in play and discovery activities for children?
- Do the parents view their child as competent?
- Do they see their child as a problem?
- Do the parents feel the child gains knowledge more via formal direct instruction or more from personal discovery?
- Do the parents believe child behaviors should be built in as early as possible?
- Do the parents believe behaviors and skills can wait until the child is ready to learn them or take on a new role?



- Do the parents think children of a particular age or gender are basically all alike?
- Do the parents believe that as long as children are safe and healthy, they will develop on their own?
- Do the parents think children need to be externally controlled or more self-directive? Does this vary for different children in the same family?
- How do the parents think about human nature? For example, are humans basically good or bad?

## PARENTS' OWN STATUS AND CONTEXT

### ■ What Other Factors, Such as Education, Home or Work Environment, or Social Class, Should Professionals Be Aware of That Might Interact With a Family's Culture to Predict Parent Behavior?

A discussion of the contextual factors that might influence parent behavior certainly fits within a discussion of cultural context. However, conclusions based on just the variable of culture can miss many artifactual variables, such as dangerous neighborhoods, that better explain some parent behavior than does culture by itself.

It is important for teachers to know what life is like for their diverse school parents. It is not always like the life of the teachers or like the lives of the teachers' parents when the teachers were schoolchildren. Factors in addition to culture are often at work in their lives. For example, research demonstrates that a parent's work situation may affect how a parent from any culture interacts with children at home. Kohn (1977) and Ogbu (1981), for example, found that a job helped parents decipher which skills their children would need in order to succeed, and these skills would then become part of their goals for their children in their new environment.

Crouter and McHale (2005) found that if parents had to defer to supervisors and never or rarely had an opportunity to share ideas or be self-directed, they tended to relate to their children in similar manners. Of course, parents would have their own thinking capacity, cultural experiences, and beliefs that preceded these jobs, and the interaction of prior beliefs, motivation, personal resources, and current work role should all be considered. Undemocratic work environments might be consistent with a new immigrant's views on parental authority, so one cannot look at either a parent's culture or work situation alone. Research in child abuse has shown that parents' motivation to provide a home environment for their children that is different from what they themselves experienced may moderate the impact of their hierarchical work setting or previous home environment.

Parents in entrepreneurial jobs, despite their own collectivist socialization, might emphasize achievement more than interdependence, and parents in bureaucracies might emphasize cooperation more than independence. Parcel and Menaghan (1994) found that even when they controlled for a mother's age, education, mental ability, income, and other factors, mothers with more job complexity created more-stimulating home environments for their children (p. 14). It is important for teachers to understand that many factors in addition to cultural background might contribute to how parents interact with their children.

In terms of stress at work, Repetti (1989) found that air traffic controllers who had had stressful days at work were more withdrawn and less emotional with their children than when their workday was unstressful. Many new immigrants, as well as other parents, are faced with long and often stressful work situations. Thus, it might be difficult for very stressed parents to always do what schools expect them to do in the evening. Repetti and Wood (1997) found the situation was even more complicated than work-related stress alone might suggest. Work stress interacts with personality type, so that temperamentally intense parents with work stress had a harder time refraining from negativity toward children at home than did less intense parents. Overall, though, mothers were better able to keep work stress from children than fathers were.

In terms of peer support at work, Greenberger, Goldberg, Hamill, O'Neil, and Payne (1989) found that despite the type of work, having supportive coworkers seems to reduce role strain for many parents. Lerner and Galambos (1986) found that if mothers were satisfied with work, their satisfaction had a positive impact on their relationship with their children when home. If they were not satisfied, they were able to keep those feelings from affecting their parenting negatively more often than men were. Therefore, social networks at work could also provide support and affect parenting positively.

What about other aspects of parental status? We must also look at parent support from others in their lives, including others at work. Recent research reviews in the United States (Fincham & Hall, 2005) reported that mothers who feel supported by their husbands often have more-positive attitudes toward parenting than do mothers who do not feel supported (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, as reported in Fincham & Hall, 2005). In some cultures, however, there is little expectation that husbands will support child rearing but higher expectations of support from one's own parents, siblings, family, or friends.

For both parents, marital problems are often associated with negative parent-child relationships and little parental involvement in children's lives (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; DeVito & Hopkins, 2001). Alternatively, marital satisfaction and adjustment correlate with parenting that is sensitive, responsive, warm, and accepting (Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1985; Grych, 2002). Cummings and Davies' work

(2002) has been very informative. Frequent but never-resolved arguments between parents have a negative impact on children and can affect how children respond to stress in the future, including at school. These children seem less able to regulate their emotions during stress. Grych and Fincham (1992) also found that what had the most negative impact on children was parents' arguing in front of them without resolving conflicts and arguing about the children.

Little research in this area has been done in culturally diverse groups of parents. We need to understand more about children whose parents often communicate nonverbally and, for the sake of harmony, do not argue in front of children. Does nonverbal parental discord affect children's development? How does one assess the impact of marital problems on these children?

Homework assignments go home to parents under all kinds of stress, much of which might affect their capacity for parental involvement as it is narrowly defined. The best parent involvement in these cases might be to not argue in front of the children, to work on the marital relationship if possible, and to get support from others to help with family needs. Researchers and counselors suggest that after divorce, the best intervention would be to help parents coparent more effectively rather than to pressure them to volunteer in school.

Feinberg (2002) strongly recommends that separated and divorced parents get support, if needed, to improve communication between them so that they can focus on being sensitive, warm, and consistent with their children in spite of their feelings toward each other. This would be parent involvement enough for many educators at such a difficult time in a family's life.

But is focusing on the couple enough? No. One must also look at the environment that affects their situation. Parents may need help finding jobs and getting the education and resources they need to be less stressed and less hostile toward each other. Fincham and Hall (2005) suggest that "the ecological niche of the couple—their life events, family constellation, socioeconomic standing, and stressful circumstances—can no longer be ignored" (p. 225). They cite a study by Conger, Rueter, and Elder (1999) that points to economic pressure as the predictor of marital problems in the predominantly rural parents they studied.

As was mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, parents need to be understood in socio-cultural context, and one must not attribute all their failings solely to individual inadequacies or their cultural roots. Our society needs to help them get the support they need to better meet all family members' needs, and we also need to understand how different cultures view help with marital or family problems. It is wise to speak with practitioners who have experience working with parents of a particular cultural background to learn how to convey offers of help so that they will be well received.

In terms of support outside of the home, Burchinal, Follmer, and Bryant (1996) studied 62 mothers of low socioeconomic status and found that mothers with large

social networks of people to rely on had more developmentally supportive homes through their children's preschool years and were warmer, more involved, and less directive with their toddlers than were mothers without large social networks.

What is *social support*? It consists of help from others that is emotional, instrumental, and informational. Cochran and Walker (2005) add the following details:

With respect to families, emotional support refers to expressions of empathy and encouragement that convey to parents that they are understood and capable of working through difficulties in order to do a good job in that role. Instrumental support refers to concrete help that reduces the number of tasks or responsibilities a parent must perform, typically household and child care tasks. Informational support refers to advice or information concerning child care or parenting. (p. 141)

That kind of support was seen in Hurtig's mothers' writing group (2005):

Recognizing the personal strength they gain from the group, some writers have described the workshop as therapeutic, while others have said it has helped them become "leaders" or "teachers." One mother told the group that writing and sharing her stories gave her the strength to carry on. (p. 256)

But is all support effective? Voight, Hans, and Bernstein (1996) found that "when support is provided by someone who is also a source of stress, the combination of support and conflict may be related to poor maternal adjustment" (p. 70). This finding has very important implications in schools. If families fear school personnel, support from the school may in fact be stressful. As Snell and Rosen (1997) assert in discussing parents of children with special needs, the practitioner needs to be seen as "a resource rather than an intruder who saps precious energy from an already burdened system" (p. 438). This has been found to be especially true in cases of emotional and informational support.

There are often cultural and socioeconomic differences in terms of the amount of control that parents have over who is in their support network. Cochran and Walker (2005) note that poor parents are at a disadvantage:

Recent studies indicate, for instance, that in the United States an unemployed, poor, African American, single mother has far less control over who is included in her personal network than does a European-American, married, middle-income mother working outside the home. (p. 241)

They also cited findings of Fischer (1982) that educational level affects social networks:

Other things being equal, the more educational credentials respondents had, the more socially active they were, the larger their networks, the more companionship they reported, the more intimate their relations, and the wider the geographic range of their ties. In general, education by itself meant broader, deeper, and richer networks. (as cited in Cochran & Walker, 2005, p. 243)

This is why projects like Hurtig's writing program (2005) for Mexican immigrant mothers are so important. It has been shown (Jack, 2000; Webster-Stratton, 1997) that low-income parents with many supports have been more nurturing and positive with their children than parents without supports. Thus, often the best support for students is to help their parents extend their networks of support with people they choose. Sheldon (2002) found that expanding social networks at school (number of parents at the same school with whom a parent interacts) to even only two people helped in terms of parent involvement at school, and expanding social networks in one's community (relatives, educators, parents with children at other schools) to three people could expand involvement with children at home. So if a parent's initial beliefs regarding parental involvement minimized their role, experience with even a few other people in their network could clarify norms of involvement and could be moderated by people in the networks and how they viewed the school and a parent's role.

Samara and Wilson (1999) also found that the family school project they designed helped parents expand their social networks of school parents. McDonald (1999) reported that one of the many positive outcomes of the Families and Schools Together program was that inner-city, isolated, at-risk parents who came to this multifamily parent involvement program reported 2 to 4 years later that they continued to see friends they had made at the program.

## **SELF-EFFICACY, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, AND CULTURAL CONTEXT**

Teachers, having studied self-efficacy for their work with children (Bandura, 1989), should not find it hard to understand that parents who think they can do something effectively are more likely to try to do it than are parents who do not believe they can actually make something happen. It is also not hard to understand that parents new to this country, in spite of their experience in another place, may not feel self-efficacious here. And even if they may feel efficacious in their homes, they may not feel the same in their children's school. Wilson (1987), as well as Bandura, noted that the environment can indeed have an impact on a parent's sense of self-efficacy. Many researchers are studying parental self-efficacy and cultural differences, but often these factors are combined with social class differences

because many newly immigrated families have a low socioeconomic status due to the challenges of learning a new language and finding good jobs that pay a fair wage.

Research with native-born, middle-class elementary school children (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997) has found a positive relationship between parental self-efficacy and child development. With middle-class parents of both elementary and middle school children, self-efficacy predicted increasing numbers of educational activities with children, higher amounts of volunteer time at school, and fewer phone calls to the teacher. Hoover-Dempsey et al. did, however, find that some parents with low income and with limited educational experience also had a sense of self-efficacy. Hurtig (2005) found that the mothers she studied believed clearly that one could indeed be a good and successful parent without being fluent in writing and speaking English.

Eccles and Harold (1996) also studied middle-class parents of elementary school and preadolescent children and suggested that a relationship exists between a lack of energy, time, and resources and less self-efficacy, as well as a relationship between parental self-confidence and parental involvement in helping a child with homework. Brody, Flor, and Gibson (1999, as cited in Luster & Okagaki, 2005) found a relationship between African American mothers' perceptions of adequate family finances and their parental efficacy and developmental goals for their children. When finances were adequate, mothers had more parental self-efficacy and held higher expectations for their children. They talked more about goals, which were identified earlier in this text as a helpful topic for parents and teachers to discuss. This research clearly supports the view that family-serving professionals must work to improve the conditions in which parents do their parenting "work" before placing generic, one-size-fits-all involvement expectations on parents.

Shumow and Lomax (2002) filled a research gap by looking at self-efficacy, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood quality in a culturally diverse, national, stratified random sample of parents of high school students in the United States. Of the 929 parents, 387 were European American, 259 African American, and 283 Latin American.

They found that some environmental factors did predict efficacy. Age was a factor: Parents of older teens felt they had less impact than did parents of younger teens. However, even within children's age groups, some differences emerged. Latin American parents who valued interdependency, respect for authority, and close family relationships over the lifespan (see also MacPhee, Fritz, & Miller-Heyl, 1996) did not think their impact would be lessened as their child became older. Thus, cultural background moderated (made less powerful) the impact of children's age on parental self-efficacy.

For African American parents, poor neighborhoods and low socioeconomic status did not always predict low parental self-efficacy. Shumow and Lomax (2002) found that these parents' experiences with extended-family members and the strength of their religious beliefs or community organizations also affected parental self-efficacy positively. Shumow and Lomax concluded that because they had found a link between parental efficacy, parenting behaviors, and adolescent outcomes, it made eminent sense to offer programs to enhance parental self-efficacy (p. 127). Of course, more good jobs, educational opportunities, and other advantages are also needed.

Samara and Wilson (1999) also focused on parental self-efficacy. Their project indicated that sensitivity to the richness of culture and a strengths-based approach with diverse parent groups paid off in enhancing the self-efficacy of students and parents. The four specific goals of the program were (1) to promote families' advocacy for their children's learning and their own through dialogue, writing, reading, and technology; (2) to facilitate the documentation of families' oral histories; (3) to provide opportunities for children to show their families what they were doing in school with computers; and (4) to explore how to connect preservice teachers with families so that the future teachers could hear about the environmental forces that have shaped families' lives, school experiences, and dreams of their children's education. Samara and Wilson's program, called First Teachers, brought parents into the school to write stories about their families with their children, using the school computers. The researchers asked the students to show their parents their computer skills and teach their families about technology. This activity alone built children's sense of efficacy and self-confidence.

After the program, families felt more aware of how their own family struggles and strong relationships were a good model for their children's motivation to persist and succeed in school. The extra benefit of such an intervention is that isolated parents came into contact with other parents and built community, thus enhancing their sense of efficacy as well. The principal told the parents how their own caring as a community of parents made the school a more caring place for all (Samara & Wilson, 1999, p. 520). The authors summarized the result of their excellent project as *reciprocal enculturation*, citing the definition by Winters (1993, p. 3): "a process whereby new cultural patterns are acquired by both systems, family and school, as they develop and mature, and each can be endowed with new energy that changes its configuration" (Samara & Wilson, 1999, p. 524). Many initiatives to enhance parents' use of technology may be found on the Family Involvement Network of Educators Web site ([www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html)). Questions to help us think about parents' self-efficacy in relation to socioeconomic status and social and cultural context are found in Box 5.5.

**BOX 5.5** Parents' Own Status and Context

- What is the work environment of the parent: Is it restrictive? Allowing for autonomy? Supportive? Entrepreneurial?
- Do the parents experience high or low degrees of role strain?
- Do the parents feel supported by each other, family, friends, community, and school?
- Do the parents have an opportunity to observe other parents or caregivers interacting with their children?
- Are you as a professional taking into consideration parental factors such as family and other social supports?
- What about the number and perception of stressful life events in the family?
- Do the parents feel the neighborhood, state, and government have responsibility to help the child or family? What do the parents do when this support does not materialize?
- How are the parents' neighborhoods affecting their parenting?
- How are marital relations or relations with a partner affecting their parenting?
- Are enough mental and physical health resources available for the parents?
- Do the parents have a sense of self-efficacy in their various roles?

**A RATIONALE FOR USING QUESTIONS TO UNDERSTAND PARENTS**

The lists in this chapter have been generated both to demonstrate the breadth of information we should know about parents that may be related in some way to their cultural roots and to suggest that the answers are often related to many other factors, including how parents think and make meaning in their world as well as their life situations. It is a practitioner's responsibility to ask these kinds of questions rather than to place parents into categories. Even providing parents with a list of questions selected from all those above can be an intervention in itself. If they have not thought about some of them, a few questions might spur their thinking. Parents themselves can decide which questions they might want to explore in more depth with others. Some parents may have foreclosed on their own parents' cultural beliefs. Others may be, as many are, "in transition," and others, as James Marcia (1980) found with youth, become "identity achieved" and may use these questions to critically evaluate their beliefs and choose the ones that best fit their own experience and social context.



### ■ How Can Schools Learn More Effectively From Culturally Diverse Families?

Practically speaking, many educators have used these questions to inform their practice with students, helping professionals, and parents. You can use them in your own educational discovery process as a lifelong learner. You can use some of them before you begin a parent program or school year and decide which questions will work for your parent-teacher population. Which will help you better understand everyone's view on critical questions? These kinds of questions can be asked of teachers and parents in school to see where there is convergence and divergence with school beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices. Heath's parent program (2001), "Planning," is designed to give parents opportunities to answer many of these questions as they decide how to parent confidently and effectively. Heath noted, however, that some questions, such as those dealing with personal adult relationships and views of authority, may be sensitive and lead parents to be defensive. When Heath and McDermott were in Russia in 1993, authority was a touchy subject for parents and one we thought better of as a discussion opener. If we had started with sensitive questions rather than ones with more face validity and that simply asked about family traditions or family needs, we might have shut down conversation (Heath, 2002).

There is no doubt that issues will arise that need to be addressed even if parent and professional beliefs collide. Beliefs, as one knows from experience, run very deep. When reading the list of questions in Box 5.5, for instance, you can probably think of many ways parents might disagree with a teacher's strongly held beliefs. These differences cannot be ignored. As Gonzalez-Mena (1997) reminds teachers, "When cultures collide, we can't just 'make nice' and hope the differences will resolve by themselves. We have to first notice them, and then we must address them" (p. 1). How does one address them? She suggests a manner very consistent with adult learning principles: dialogue. She differentiates dialogue from what people in Western societies are most familiar with, which is arguing or debate, with clear winners and losers. Dialogue is different from arguing in these important ways, according to Gonzalez-Mena:

In dialoging, rather than trying to convince someone of their own viewpoint, people try to understand the other perspective. The idea is not to win but to find the best solution for all people involved in the conflict. Here are some of the differences between an argument and a dialogue:

- The object of an argument is to win; the object of a dialogue is to gather information.
- The arguer tells; the dialoguer asks.
- The arguer tries to persuade; the dialoguer tries to learn.

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- The arguer tries to convince; the dialoguer tries to discover.
- The arguer sees two opposing views and considers hers the valid or best one; the dialoguer is willing to understand multiple viewpoints. (pp. 3–4)

Dialoging is one aspect of what Gonzalez-Mena (1997) describes as an ideal multiethnic view, which also involves transformative education and culturally competent care for children. By *transformative education*, she means that “when we acknowledge that our experiences with one another are important, when we stretch to understand different points of view, we become transformed by each other’s life experiences to a different level of knowledge and sensitive multiethnic care. That’s good for children” (p. 15). Her definition of *cultural competence* is also helpful: “Caregivers and parents understand how program and family values may differ and work together toward blending differing value systems” (p. 15).

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, you have seen that one needs to consider the cultural background of a parent and family as just one piece of information to add to an assessment of the whole world in which the parent exists. One must consider the interaction between culture and social class and also understand the goals of parents, which may differ from the stereotypes of their cultural group. Schools need to work with family support agencies to help parents gain the personal resources (such as self-efficacy) and external resources (financial support, jobs, good neighborhoods and community services, good child care and elder care, and so on) they must have if they are to be involved as they might like to be. Everyone must also learn what parent involvement means in different cultures, because in some, active work in schools with teachers is not expected of parents. The next chapter presents a caring school model that takes much of this chapter’s information into consideration.

### Some Activities and Questions for Investigation, Reflection, and Action

#### *Think*

1. Identify 10 questions about parents listed in this chapter and the ideal answers to these questions based on the theories and research you read in Chapters 2 and 3. Cite the theories or research that supports your choices.

2. From all the questions in the chapter, identify the 10 you would most want to ask your students' parents as you begin a school year.
3. Look at the research relating to social contextual variables and culture. Try through an outline, table, diagram, or mind map to organize the data to help you better understand and visualize how these factors are related to a parent's behavior and to each other.

### **Reflect**

4. Take time to journal. Think about your own answers to the questions chosen in the second activity above. How many of your answers are similar to your own family of origin's views and how many are different? If different, why do you think this is so?

### **Plan**

5. Plan a workshop for new teachers. Outline the key themes you would emphasize in terms of cultural competence.
6. Interview a parent, teacher, or classmate who is of a different cultural background from yours. Ask the person a select number of questions from the chapter. Discuss which answers are similar to those of the person's family of origin and which are different. Ask what influenced the person's similar or changed goals or beliefs.
7. Role-play a situation in which a school staff person describes some parents who never volunteer in the school as uninvolved in their children's lives or uninvolved in helping the school. What kind of mindful questions might you ask this person to broaden his or her understanding of what involvement could look like for various people?

