

Bridging Cultures with Classroom Strategies

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Teachers who understand both the collectivistic value system of Latino culture and the individualistic culture of U.S. schools can use practices that honor both home and school.

I wanted to understand my students better so I started studying Mexican culture. Then I realized that the children in my class came from many distinct regions, each with different histories and traditions. I just knew that I would never know enough. I had to give up trying.

—Kindergarten teacher

This kindergarten teacher voiced the frustration experienced by many teachers. However, she had a different outlook after attending a workshop called Bridging Cultures, which focused on a basic value system common to Latino cultures that transcends languages, histories, and traditions: collectivism (Triandis, 1989). Collectivism is common in Mexico and in Central and South America, particularly among the rural poor who have had limited formal education. Because many Latino immigrants come to the United States with this kind of background, understanding collectivism becomes invaluable for teachers serving immigrant Latino children.

Collectivism Versus Individualism

Collectivism is a cluster of interrelated values that emphasize the interdependence of family members (fig. 1). Within this value system, children are taught to be helpful to others and to contribute to the success of any group they belong to—beginning with the family. Even knowledge of the physical world is placed within a social context.

Figure 1. Features of Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism	Collectivism
The child as an individual	The child as part of the family
Independence	Helpfulness and interdependence
Individual achievement	Group success
Scientific information disengaged from	Scientific information embedded in social

social contexts	experiences
<i>Authors' note:</i> This represents a partial list of features associated with each value system. For additional qualities, please see Hofstede (1980), Triandis, H. (1989), Rothstein-Fisch, (1998).	

In contrast, schools foster individualism, viewing the child as an individual who should be developing independence and valuing individual achievement (Greenfield, 1994). Unlike collectivism, which emphasizes the social context of learning and knowledge, individualism emphasizes information disengaged from its social context (Hofstede, 1980). When collectivistic students encounter individualistic schools, conflicts that are based on hidden values and assumptions can occur:

A kindergarten teacher was showing her class an actual chicken egg that would be hatching soon. She was explaining the physical properties of the egg, and she asked the children to describe eggs by thinking about the times they had cooked and eaten eggs. One of the children tried three times to talk about how she cooked eggs with her grandmother, but the teacher disregarded these comments in favor of a child who explained how eggs look white and yellow when they are cracked. (Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1995, p. 44)

The first child's answer was typical of the associations encouraged in collectivistic cultures, where objects are most meaningful when they are used in connection with social interactions. However, the teacher expected students to describe eggs as isolated physical entities and did not value the object as a connection among people in social relationships.

The teacher was unaware that her question was ambiguous. Children who shared her orientation assumed that she was interested in the physical properties of the eggs, even though she had not made that point explicit. Children who did not share her orientation made different assumptions. They assumed that she was interested in the object as a mediator of social relationships (Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz, 1995).

To help teachers understand the assumptions underlying individualism and collectivism, we developed the Bridging Cultures Project as a research-based, professional development program. We introduced elementary school teachers serving large immigrant Latino populations to a new way of understanding the values that influence behaviors.

Promoting Helpfulness

When teachers understood that helpfulness is highly valued in collectivistic cultures, they questioned certain classroom practices. For example, in collectivistic households, older children are expected to help younger ones, even when it means putting aside their own task. But teachers often assign individual children to classroom roles, such as chalkboard cleaner or attendance monitor. When friends help one another, teachers may admonish them, saying, "That's Marco's job. You have your own job to do!"

However, once teachers understood the importance of helpfulness in collectivistic cultures, they no longer considered the helpfulness that children learned at home a discipline problem. Teachers began to appoint two children to each task or to allow children to help one another. Clean-up time became pleasant because children helped until the class was clean. These classroom changes increased efficiency, task completion, and classroom harmony. Teachers supported children for being helpful instead of punishing them for interfering with a classmate's responsibility. Helpfulness, a child development goal important to Latino immigrant parents, was valued at school.

Sharing Group Success

A 3rd grade Bridging Cultures teacher, Amanda Perez, mindful of the collectivistic orientation, initiated curriculum changes to systematically expand group learning. First, she increased choral reading so that it became a regular part of daily language arts. Trying out their burgeoning English skills in a group allowed the limited English proficient students to practice the rhythm and the sound of English without being spotlighted.

Perez also used the value of helpfulness in an academic context. At the end of each reading session, she gave each child a copy of the homework. The children discussed the questions, but were not allowed to write down the answers until they were at home. In this way, students more proficient in English helped classmates rehearse the homework. This literacy practice and preview resulted in a 100 percent homework return rate, surpassing the teacher's highest expectations. Perez stated,

Most teachers keep students isolated by levels. Now I mix them up. I have also learned that helping one another is not cheating! Because of the Bridging Cultures project, their English is improving. It is so nonthreatening because of the group experience.

In math, group celebrations incorporate an element of collectivism while recognizing individual academic achievement. For example, when an individual student advances to the next level of the multiplication table, the child rings a bell, stopping all action in the classroom and allowing everyone to clap. In this way, classmates share individual success, and one child's success becomes a success for the total group. Individual academic achievement, an intrinsic school value, is accomplished, and children are appreciated for their contribution to the group goal of multiplication mastery.

Scientific Information and Social Context

Understanding collectivism can also eliminate problematic assumptions about what constitutes scientific knowledge. For example, 4th and 5th graders in Marie Altchech's class were learning about plants and animals. Before the children took an excursion to a nearby wetlands, a park docent visited the classroom to prepare them. He asked, "What do you know about hummingbirds?" Students began to tell stories about their family's experiences with birds, but the docent became impatient and said, "No more stories!" He expected students to use scientific

language to talk about hummingbird anatomy or ecology, that is, to talk about birds out of their social context. When the children were told to stop telling stories, they became silent.

However, in a Bridging Cultures workshop, Altchech had learned about and analyzed the egg example mentioned earlier. She knew that her students would first consider scientific information in the context of shared family experiences. She also knew that the children did possess the ability to describe physical and behavioral aspects of birds, but that this knowledge might be embedded in a social context. She developed a plan to tap both sets of knowledge.

After the docent left, Altchech invited the children to tell their family stories about birds. Her goal was to give them a collectivistic way to engage in scientific discoveries. As the children shared their family experiences, the teacher wrote story highlights on the left side of the chalkboard and scientific aspects of the children's experiences and observations on the right. This process honored the children's stories while producing a rich and dynamic list of topics for scientific discourse. The teacher and the class valued the stories and the scientific information equally.

In one story, a child reported being in the garden with her grandmother when she noticed that hummingbirds seemed to stand still in the air. This family-based story led to a discussion about how the wings of hummingbirds must beat rapidly to sustain their apparent stillness. The children, fascinated by the topic, engaged in scientific discourse, scaffolded by the teacher, about how body mass, metabolism, and food intake are related. Whereas the docent conveyed the message that the storytelling approach was wrong, the teacher validated the students' stories and used them to build a bridge to the scientific culture valued in school.

When teachers understand and respect the collectivistic values of immigrant Latino children, the opportunities for culturally informed learning become limitless. Our examples in classroom management, reading, math, and science demonstrate that educators can design instruction responsive to diverse groups that does not undermine home-based cultural values.

Although the framework of individualism-collectivism is only one tool for understanding cultural differences (and we caution against sweeping generalizations), it does open the door to new ways of thinking and acting for teachers. Instead of advocating cultural sensitivity in a general way, this framework alerts teachers to specific cultural differences that are likely to diverge from school-based practices and values. Most important, the framework encourages teachers to recognize their own practices as cultural in origin rather than as simply the "right way" to do things.

The frustration caused by the feeling of "not knowing enough about each culture" can be abated when teachers use their knowledge of individualism and collectivism to understand the underlying motivation behind specific cultural practices, including those of the school.

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