Communication

Background

In the field of parental involvement, it is widely accepted that educators and parents must engage in regular and open dialogue to define mutual expectations for teaching, learning *and* parenting—a key factor in school success in low-voice communities (Coelho, 1998; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

However, literature specific to parent-teacher communication tends to focus on *one-way* communication. Specifically, the focus is on more traditional and formal types of educator-to-parent communication, such as, memos notices, phone calls, report cards, and conferences (Coelho, 1998; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Miretsky, 2004). For parents from low-voice communities, these communication practices may not be relevant to their needs or expectations (Coelho, 1998). Traditional and formal types of educator-to-parent communication, which have been institutionalized to involve parents, tend to ignore the needs of parents from low-voice communities, who may be unfamiliar with the school's expectations (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Further, these communication practices may actually maintain a professional distance between parents and educators, hindering regular and open dialogue between them (Miretsky, 2004).

For parents from low-voice communities, creating and engaging in opportunities to talk with educators may be especially difficult. Barriers these parents might face in communicating with educators include (but are not limited to):

• low proficiency in the school language
• little knowledge of the school culture and school system
• different socio-economic status
• different knowledge-base
• different understandings and practices of communication
• fear
• lack of transportation
• lack of time
• unwelcoming school environment
• self-esteem
• school rules/regulations
• personality conflicts
• children's feedback regarding the school
• previous difficult experience in communicating with school personnel

Epstein (2006) advocates for "two-way, three-way and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, students, and the community" (p. 2). In addition to multi-directional and multi-channel communication, "communication requirements" for building communities that promote school success include "investment in the school community, direct and honest communication, trust, mutual

respect, and mutual goals" (Miretsky, 2004, p. 815). When working with parents from low-voice communities, it is especially important to meet these communication requirements (Joshi, Eberly, & Konzal, 2005).

Advantages of meeting these communication requirements for all stakeholders include:

- increased mutual learning opportunities for parents and educators about each other's values, beliefs, and practices
- reinforcement of students', parents', and educators' goals
- improved parent-teacher relationships, teacher-student relationships, and parent-child relationships
- increased opportunities for parent-teacher collaboration
- increased congruency between home and school cultures
- increased opportunities for inclusion of home culture and language in the classroom and in the daily life of the school

Educators working with families from low-voice communities can reach out to parents by designing programs that encourage parents to visit the school. Such an invitation will promote informal interactions with educators and establish honest and direct two-way communication (Coelho, 1998).

More specifically, educators can also:

- be specific about the purpose of all phone calls and meetings
- arrange to have interpreters make phone-calls and/or be present at all meetings
- avoid the use of professional jargon in all communication
- ensure all written materials are translated into parents' home languages
- share information about students' social and academic successes
- share tips and strategies for supporting students at home
- share information about school policies and practices
- share information about educators' values, beliefs, and practices
- elicit information about parents' values, beliefs, and practices
- hold information nights for parents from specific groups
- invite community leaders from those groups to facilitate the information nights
- initiate informal conversation with parents when they visit the school
- invite parents into the classroom
- encourage parents to ask questions and express their concerns

For more tips and strategies for improving parent-teacher communication, refer to "Strategies for Dealing with Language Barriers" on page 26 of this handbook.

Annotated Bibliography

Coelho, E. (1998). *Teaching and learning in multicultural schools: An integrated approach. Bilingual education and bilingualism 13*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

The book outlines approaches and strategies that schools and teachers can adopt to provide educational experiences meeting the needs of all learners in culturally diverse schools and classrooms, especially those in areas in which new immigrants settle.

Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1991). Involving parents in schools: A process of empowerment. *American Journal of Education*. 100(1), 20-46.

This four-year study in a southern California school district examines parent involvement activities affecting about 100 families aiming to encourage Spanish-speaking parents to participate more fully in their children's schooling. Unconventional activities validating families' social and cultural experience are more successful than conventional means of encouraging parent participation.

Epstein, J. L. (2006). *Epstein's framework of six types of involvement*. Baltimore: Partnership Center for the Social Organization of Schools.

The document offers an updated version of Epstein's framework of six types of parental involvement, highlighting new definitions of key concepts. It also outlines sample practices, challenges, and expected outcomes for students, parents, and teachers.

Greenwood, G. E., & Hickman, C. W. (1991). Research and practice in parent involvement: Implications for teacher education. *The Elementary School Journal*. 91(3), 279-288.

Discusses the nature of parent involvement, barriers to parent involvement, and ways to overcome these barriers. Teachers interact with the parent as audience, volunteer, paraprofessional, teacher of hihe/sher own child, learner, and decision maker. Ten recommendations for teacher education are offered.

Grossman, H. (2007). *Necessary conversations about English language learners: Templates for success*. McHenry, IL: Delta Systems Co.

This is a workbook that will support school administrators and educators in the effort to communicate effectively about issues such as cultural diversity and creating a welcoming environment. The scenarios address elementary, secondary, and adult education levels.

Hamayan, E., & Freeman, R. (Eds.). (2006). *English language learners at school: A guide for administrators*. Philadelphia, PA: Caslon Publishing.

This book is a practical guide that administrators and educators can use to evaluate their school's program for ELLs, identify strengths and needs of their program and practices, and develop strategies for action. Chapter 2 focuses on strategies for building relationships between the school and community as well as how to communicate with parents in ways that they can understand.

Hughes, P., & MacNaughton, G. (2001). Building equitable staff-parent communication in early childhood settings: An Australian case study. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*. 3(2), 1-19.

This qualitative study examined the perceptions of early childhood staff from a variety of early childhood settings in Australia regarding their experiences with the federal government's Quality Improvement and Accreditation Scheme (QIAS). The findings revealed that participants were consistently ambivalent about involving parents in their program because developing a shared understanding with parents about what was in the best interests of their child was neither easy nor guaranteed.

Joshi, A., Eberly, J., & Konzal, J. (2005). Dialogue across cultures: Teachers' perceptions about communication with diverse families. *Multicultural Education*. 13(2), 11-15.

The authors assess teachers' perceptions about communication with diverse families. They add to the literature on how parents and teachers can work together to build common expectations and to support student learning.

Miretzky, D. (2004). The communication requirements of democratic schools: Parent-teacher perspectives on their relationships. *Teachers College Record*. 106(4), 814-851.

This article argues for the recognition of the importance of talk among parents and teachers both as a research methodology and as a desirable outcome in creating and sustaining democratic communities that support school improvement. The study found that parents and teachers may routinely frame the meanings of their encounters in terms of the children they have in common. However, it appears that what they look for from each other is clearly connected to what they need for themselves as people who share a community that reflects democratic values.

Munn, P. (1985). Accountability and parent-teacher communication. *British Educational Research Journal*. 11(2), 105-111.

Drawing on recent research on accountability, Munn argues that parents are predominately interested in different kinds of information than what is available to them, and that parents' perception of teachers as experts inhibits them from obtaining this information.

Summary of the DVD Chapter

The DVD chapter on communication addresses the following topics:
- The significance of home-school communication for children, parents, and school personnel
- School personnel's understandings and practices of communication with parents from low-voice communities
- Parents' understandings and practices of communication with school personnel
- School personnel's experiences of communicating with parents from low-voice communities
- Parents' experiences of communicating with school personnel
- Barriers to home-school communication
- Possible solutions for overcoming barriers to home-school communication

Questions to consider before viewing:
- What do you understand by the word "communication"?
- Why is communication with parents important?
- How do you communicate with parents from low-voice communities?
- What factors influence your decision to communicate or not communicate with parents from low-voice communities?
- Do you communicate differently with parents from low-voice communities than you do with other parents? Why or why not?
- What obstacles might parents from low-voice communities face when trying to communicate with educators?

Questions to consider after viewing:
- How did educators facilitate communication with parents from low-voice communities?
- How might educators knowingly or unknowingly be hindering communication with parents from low-voice communities?
- What strategies can be implemented to improve communication with parents from low-voice communities?