

# The Roles of Schools and Families

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## Background

There has been limited research that focuses on how teachers and immigrant parents negotiate their different perspectives of the teacher's role. The scarcity of material on the subject might lie in the fact that attempting to culturally categorize the teacher's roles would result in overgeneralizations and stereotyping. This is because the role of the teacher is not only determined by one's cultural identity, but also by other factors such as age, education, previous school experiences, and preferred styles of learning (Stanley, 2004). Though we are aware of the risks of culturally categorizing the teacher's role, we do feel that there is value in exploring these perceptual variations. We believe that this is a worthwhile task because of the evidence of cultural differences discussed by both parents and teachers in the DVD.

In some cultures, the teacher is one of the most important members in the community and is highly respected. An Arabic-speaking parent in the video explains:

*“In our society, the teacher holds a special place. The poet, Ahmad Shawky says, ‘Rise to the teacher and salute him. The teacher is almost a messenger from God.’ The teacher in our culture is like a prophet, and a prophet is the medium through which you teach principles, whether etiquette, academic, or even religious. When we arrived in Canada, we realized that this image of the teacher did not exist.”*

In other cultures, teachers take on a parental role in their student's life; having the authority to guide and discipline the child just as a parent would do in the Canadian context. In these cultures, parents do not involve themselves with the school because the expectation is that teachers will act in their child's best interest as both a teacher and as a parent while the child is at school.

In a study of Asian and Pacific Island parents, Schwartz (1995) found that parents felt that they were not supposed to interfere with the education of their child as they viewed teachers as the authority over that aspect of the child's life. A teacher that sought parental input was viewed by parents as incompetent.

Newcomer parents to Canada may not be familiar with the role of their child's teacher, and their expectations may differ depending on their former environment. When parents discover that the teacher's role does not coincide with their expectations or previous experiences, tension and conflict can emerge between the teacher and parents. It may also lead to parents' alienation.

For example, a teacher in Canada might be concerned about parents' absence from the school and assume that this means a disinterest in their child's

education. The parent, on the other hand, may assume that parental presence in the school would be interfering and that the teacher would contact the parents if there were something serious to discuss.

Due to the divergent perspectives on the role of the teacher across cultures, it becomes important for teachers and school administrators in Canada to make newcomer parents aware of the expectations placed on teachers and parents within the Canadian context.

## **Strategies to Help Educators Facilitate Parents' Understanding of Teachers' and Parents' Roles in Canada**

### **Awareness of Canadian cultural values and beliefs**

- Every educational institution has its own unique cultural characteristics.
- Try to become more aware of the cultural values and beliefs of mainstream educational institutions in Canada (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999 in Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003).

### **Understand the cultural values and beliefs of the families you are serving**

- Do your own research (books, pamphlets, internet, etc.).
- Ask parents more direct questions about their culture (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999 in Hwa-Froelich & Westby, 2003).
- Do not assume that every family follows the beliefs and practices that you read about in books (Lahman & Park, 2004).

### **Reflect upon your relationship with the parents with whom you communicate more easily**

- Consider that people tend to communicate more easily with those who are similar to themselves.
- The closer the parents' cultural characteristics are to those of the school, the higher the chance of parents being able to advocate for their child (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).
- Challenge yourself to communicate effectively with parents who may have expectations and backgrounds that are very different from your own (Flett & Conderman, 2001).

### **Meet with parents**

- Try to clarify what the role of the teacher is in Canada.
- Try to explain the expectations for parent participation in Canadian schools. (Schwartz, 1995).

## Annotated Bibliography

Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1991). Involving parents in the schools: A process of empowerment.

*American Journal of Education*, 100, 20-46.

This four-year study in a southern Californian school district examined parent-involvement activities as they encouraged isolated 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.

Flett, A., & Conderman, G. (2001). Enhance the involvement of parents from culturally

and linguistically diverse backgrounds. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 37(1),

53-55.

Flett and Conderman present twenty strategies for enhancing the involvement of parents from diverse backgrounds, including exploring parents' expectations, learning about the family's culture, and providing communication in many forms.

Hwa-Froelich, D. A., & Westby, C. E. (2003). Frameworks of education: Perspectives of

Southeast Asian parents and Head Start staff. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, 34(4), 299-319.

This study found that Asian parents, Southeast Asian parents, and Head Start staff were unaware of differences in their beliefs and values in the area of education, parenting, child learning, and disabilities. This led to confusion and misunderstanding.

Lahman, M. K. E., & Park, S. (2004). Understanding children from diverse cultures:

Bridging of parents and teachers. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 12(2), 131-142.

This is a case study that explores how Korean and Chinese families negotiate their perspectives with U.S. teachers regarding school.

Park, F. W. (2001). *FINE forum e-newsletter: Teacher talk*. Retrieved, August 6, 2006,

from <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/fineforum/forum2/teachertalk.html>

Frederick Won Park shares his strategies for reaching out to diverse families and preparing student teachers to support families.

Schwartz, W. (1995). *A guide to communicating with Asian American families: For parents/about parents*. Retrieved August 6, 2006, from [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/26/9e/6a.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/26/9e/6a.pdf)

This guide describes how the backgrounds and cultures of the various Asian and Pacific Islander groups affect their attitudes and behaviour.

Stanley, K. (2004). *The role of the teacher, the role of the learner, the role of technologies: Finding balance in the classroom*. Retrieved August 6, 2006, from <http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej28/f1.html>

This website highlights a discussion on ESL/EFL classroom pedagogy, looking in particular at the role of the teacher as it emerges through the new technologies we are incorporating into our lives. It also revisits older questions of the role each of us plays in the learning process.

## Summary of the DVD Chapter

**The DVD chapter on the roles of schools and families addresses the following topics:**

- The teacher's role in different cultures
- Parents' frustrations in dealing with the mismatch between their expectations of teachers and the role that Canadian teachers play
- Teachers' awareness of parental expectations
- How teachers negotiate their role in light of parents' differing expectations
- The need for a school's teaching staff to reflect the diverse student population so that students have role models from their own culture
- The need for administration to be a role model for teachers on good parent-teacher relationships

**Questions to consider before viewing:**

- How do you view your role as an educator?
- What expectations do you have of parents?
- What expectations do you feel parents have of you?
- Are you aware of any cultural differences in parents' and teachers' roles?
- How do you negotiate differences with parents?
- Whose responsibility is it to help parents understand the teacher's role and the parent's role in the Canadian education system?

**Questions to consider after viewing:**

- How are teachers viewed in different cultures?
- How do these views match or mismatch with your view of a Canadian educator?
- How does parent involvement differ in various cultures?
- How do these views match or mismatch with your expectations of parents in Canada?
- How can educators inform and help parents understand the role of teachers and parents in the Canadian education system?