

Empowering Parents of Multicultural Backgrounds

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Parents in the neighborhood where I teach in Tucson, Arizona, are sometimes viewed as lacking. They are viewed as lacking in parenting skills, lacking in education and lacking in knowledge. When I began this project, I thought I knew the community where I taught. I had always made an effort to welcome parents into my classroom and validate them and their opinions. Yet when I look back, I realize that even with the efforts I made, there were many funds of knowledge to be tapped.

I will give an example of how my experience in conducting ethnographic research helped me reach this untapped potential. This is really a case history of Jacob, the African-American father of one of my kindergarten students, Alicia. The change that occurred in Jacob was phenomenal and yet the talents were there just waiting to be channeled in a new direction. I had chosen Alicia's family for my first interview. I had some difficulties with Alicia's behavior and thought working with the family would help.

I had made home visits many times over the prior 10 years, but the focus had always been a teacher agenda. I wanted to know what the parents and I could do to help the student whose home I was visiting. If you contrast this with the actions of being an ethnographer, the whole atmosphere changes because you let the parents do the talking. A rapport develops that puts everyone at ease.

Prior to my home visit, Alicia's dad, Jacob, had brought their pet rabbit to school when we were studying pets. I found out he was a groundskeeper. I was looking for some expertise to start a garden with my kindergarten

class and he was the perfect person to do just that. Jacob helped us prepare and plant a vegetable and flower garden. As far as I was concerned I had already tapped into a fund of knowledge and my project was a success. If I had not gone to the home I would have thought that gardening was the most important fund of knowledge Jacob had to offer. By the end of my second home visit and interview, however, I had discovered that Jacob had impressive communication skills. He would ponder each question and respond in an articulate and eloquent fashion. His communication skills were another fund of knowledge.

During one of my visits to Jacob's home, I noticed a guitar propped against a closet and discovered Jacob played guitar and keyboard and also wrote songs and poetry. I might have discovered this resource if I had sent a survey home, but I would have probably only asked Jacob to come in to play for us. Instead, I asked him to write children's songs and create a musical based on the story of *The Little Red Hen*. It would tie in both his knowledge of music and of gardening. When Jacob came to class after writing his first two songs, it was amazing. The kids loved the catchy words he had written and tunes he played on his guitar and his keyboard. We began to get down to the business of putting the musical together and practicing on the stage.

By this time I had started to interview my second family. Wanda was an African-American single mother raising her son and was a foster parent to many other children. It turned out she had a background in dance so I asked her to help choreograph our musical. She worked full time but was able to come in on her days off.

The preparations for the musical Jacob had written were in full swing! I organized costume-making workshops and several of the parents participated. The children learned seven songs for the play, with two of the songs related to spin-off topics. Since the *Little Red Hen* story involves bread-making, we did a multicultural unit on bread and I asked Jacob to write a tortilla song. A Navajo parent came in to help us make fry bread and my teaching assistant's *nana* and *tía* (101 and 102 years old!) came to school to make tortillas with the children. I would not have thought to have these two tortilla-making experts come if I had not actually been seeking further funds of knowledge. The children sang the tortilla song over and over.

The class performance of the musical was an incredible experience. We performed it five times for the parents and for other classes in school. The talents Jacob shared with the class were great, but the other results for him were far more important than presenting the musical to the parents. These results included:

- He realized he loved working with children and coming to the school. He experienced enjoyment!
- He had control! He was empowered. His skills were needed.

- He was interested. He wanted to be there and was engaged.
- Jacob realized that his musical talents could be shifted to children and writing children's songs, which he had never done before. He felt success! He could see the children's reaction to his songs.
- His self-worth increased, as he felt valued. No one judged him by the way he looked, the clothes he wore, or the amount of his education. He was accepted for who he was and what he had to offer.

Jacob was not the only one to benefit from this experience. The children and parents benefited by seeing a parent bring a new avenue of learning into the classroom. Parents could see that they were valued and that their talents could be utilized. In a community where parent participation is often poor, more parents participated as we needed costume makers, stagehands, and make-up experts. Some parents made up their own ideas for the costumes and created very unique designs. That increased their self-esteem and confidence because the teacher did not impose the costume designs! We even had all but one family at the performance for the parents!

The children changed dramatically, too. When they first went on stage some were shy and would not sing. But by the end, we had a class full of soloists and performers. They gained a tremendous amount of self-esteem. The parents saw the growth in their children as a result of this performance, and many of them were moved to tears. The play gave the class a special bond that they will remember for the rest of their lives.

Alicia was especially proud of her father, and that made her proud of herself. She adjusted better because she knew me as a person rather than just a teacher.

WHAT OTHER IMPACTS DID THE MUSICAL HAVE ON JACOB?

Jacob ended up writing a musical for his son's fifth grade class as well. This second musical focused on the issues of drugs, violence, and gang pressures. The children helped him write it. You might think that was the end of the story but it was only the beginning.

That year, Jacob had rarely attended any Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and was turned off by the negativity of the meetings. His involvement with the musicals brought out his concern with the PTA leadership so he decided to run for, and was elected, president.

The next year, Jacob was extremely involved at school. He conducted the PTA meetings with sensitivity and led them in a positive direction. This positive focus inspired much greater attendance and a more balanced ethnic representation among attendees than in the past. That year an issue came

to the forefront concerning the right of our school's students to attend their neighborhood middle school instead of being bused across town to comply with court-ordered desegregation mandates. Jacob rallied the parents around this cause and he spoke to the school board about the injustice. His speech was featured on the news that evening on all three channels. Currently the issue is being brought before a federal judge.

Jacob's involvement was a catalyst for change and empowered the students and parents. Parents who never attended meetings before were suddenly not only coming to the meetings, but also speaking out, asking questions, demanding answers, and addressing officials who were brought to the school to listen to their concerns.

Jacob was obviously an untapped gold mine of funds of knowledge. He was not just a knowledgeable gardener; he also had musical talents, the ability to relate to children and adults and a desire to make a difference in people's lives. He just had not realized how to do this. His ability to express himself while listening to others and empowering them made him a great leader.

HOW ARE TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND CHILDREN CHANGED WHEN TEACHERS TAP INTO FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE?

Through these in-depth case studies of families, the teacher-researcher begins to tap into a wide range of resources he or she previously may not have realized were available. The teacher develops ideas and strategies to utilize these skills. The fact that teachers are enthusiastic when they discover these talents is critical in motivating parents and children. If the teacher places value on this knowledge, then the parents suddenly feel important. They feel empowered. This alone can dramatically change the climate of the teacher-home relationship. The parents feel equal. The barrier between the professional and the home caregiver is broken. A friendship develops and the relationship becomes ongoing and permanent.

Back in the classroom, the teacher shares the discoveries she has made about the students' families with the children. The child hears the teacher extolling all the skills and knowledge her parents have, and the child's perception of her own parents improves as well as the child's perception of herself. This often creates a special bond between the child and the teacher, which helps them cope better when there are conflicts.

After making visits to a student's home and discovering all its resources, the teacher views that student differently. The teacher has seen the child in her home setting, which helps in understanding the whole child. The

teacher is able to relate classroom experiences to situations the child has experienced. The teacher listens more attentively and is more enthusiastic and sensitive with this child. A ripple effect also occurs—the teacher, to some extent, is more sensitive to all the children and their parents, even if there has not been a direct home visit.

Once a teacher has spent time in a child's home, the teacher can, to some degree, have a better feel for the home lives of all students. Homes are different, and it is beneficial to visit each family as time permits. But connecting with just one family creates an awareness of parents as people. These are people with skills to offer, with successes and struggles, and with goals and dreams. Teachers take more interest when children discuss happenings in the home and ask more questions. For example, a child recently came to school wearing a T-shirt with a handpainted cactus. Prior to being involved in this project, my response to this shirt might have been to say, "Isn't that a cute shirt!" Instead, I wanted to know where he got it and who made it. When he told me his grandmother painted it, I was ecstatic. I knew I had found a fund of knowledge that I could use. I decided to have my class decorate T-shirts. More than half the parents in my classroom helped to raise the money to buy the shirts and supplies with a bake sale, and then they helped the children paint the fronts of their shirts.

I interviewed another family recently and discovered that the father was exceptionally artistic. I told the class that Crystal's dad was an artist. Normally, I would not have noticed that talent but just noticed that he was a custodian at a school. Crystal beamed with pride. All that day she sang, "My dad's an artist. My dad's an artist!" It boosted her self-esteem and made her proud of her dad. That night I took the T-shirts to their house because we were doing decorative lettering and designs on the backs of all the T-shirts. The dad smiled as I told him about the song Crystal had sung. Normally, I would not have had any contact with this family since the parents both work full-time. This project allowed them to participate outside the classroom.

I feel so comfortable with this family now and I know they feel comfortable with me. Crystal has really bonded with me. At the beginning of the year, she was intensely sensitive, but the home visits have helped her adjust better.

FROM MATH TO FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE TO QUILTS

Another experience I had integrating funds of knowledge into my curriculum was through studying quilts as part of a math investigation. A child mentioned that his grandmother made quilts. Previously I would have just said, "Wow, that's great!" This quilting resource gave me the idea to have

every child make a family quilt. Each family drew pictures of the members and special events on quilt squares and intermingled them with scrap material squares. Parents who did not have time or knowledge were helped by parents who did. I discovered many parents made quilts, so this project tapped into the talents of many families.

OTHER SPINOFFS

Identifying the funds of knowledge of my students' families has led me to reflect on my own funds of knowledge. Recently, I wrote some songs for a musical about the desert. I discovered I could write songs as well! I have funds of knowledge that I have not yet tapped.

As another example, during our fall conference one year, Wilma, a grandmother, told me she was very busy and would not be able to volunteer very often. I asked her what she did and she said she made African American clothes with material she ordered from Africa. She displayed them in fashion shows. I asked her if we could put on a fashion show with our class in the spring, when it fit into her time schedule. She said "yes," but months went by without any more mention of it. Finally, we talked about it again and I started to request donations of material from the parents.

I ordered some solid, bright-colored material from the school warehouse and got a multicultural book from the library for parents and students to see designs from different cultures. I asked a parent to cut sponges in the shape of some Ashanti symbols from Ghana. While I still envisioned Wilma sewing outfits for the whole class, I knew this would be extremely time consuming.

The project got underway with two mothers and their daughters who worked in the classroom while the class was outside. They used acrylic paints and each made different designs on their large piece of fabric. One was very structured with a large lizard and the prints in squares, and the other had prints and dots all over it. As the parents were talking, I discovered that one of the mothers, an African American woman, had a sister who also put on fashion shows. Evelyn had learned (from her sister) how to wrap the large material into a dress. That was the answer for most of the girls' outfits. No sewing was needed. Parents could come in, do designs on the fabric, and the outfit was ready.

Wilma then brought in her own material to school, and about 10 kids painted on the fabric. She took the fabric home and sewed a dashiki top with a gathered skirt that was stunning. I began to display all of the outfits as they were created. Grandfathers and grandmothers, mothers and fathers (including two who had not participated all year), aunts and uncles, all came to help their child print and paint their outfits. The boys used a sim-

ple V-neck Ghanaian dashiki design that only needed a small amount of stitching on each side under the arms. Various parents sewed these.

Once we had the outfits, we arranged the fashion show. I decided to teach the children an African rain dance, and we made rainmakers from toilet paper rolls filled with macaroni. We included an authentic rainmaker stick that a parent had loaned us. We collected both African and traditional instruments to use in the production.

At the same time all this parent participation was going on, I received a fabric kit from the University of California at Berkeley Lawrence Hall of Science's Full Option Science System (FOSS) science program, a program our district has adopted, which was perfect. We investigated fabrics. Some parents brought in different fabrics, and we made a display of the weavings (using cross-age helpers). We did additional investigations such as taking material apart to learn about its construction. Students compared and tested fabric for absorbency and experimented with stains and ways to remove them. The children could really see the stages of the project, "From Fabric to Fashion," which covered the walls with the science work and clothing designs.

As I have mentioned, this particular success did not stem from a single home visit; rather it was inspired by my experience making home visits. I learned many things from the home visits that enabled me to recognize a fund of knowledge and expand on it. I am more tuned in to parents now because of my experience with the Funds of Knowledge project. It is important to perceive the parent as someone with expertise, and this helps create a trusting relationship between parents and teachers.

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO DISCOVER THE FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR STUDENTS' FAMILIES?

I have found that the following ideas have been helpful to me when seeking to discover the funds of knowledge of my students' families:

- Go on at least one or two home visits with the sole purpose of learning about the family and their talents.
- Listen actively to your students and they will continuously give you clues about their interests and the talents of their parents and grandparents.
- Look for homemade articles the children are wearing and ask questions about these articles.
- Have your students interview their parents at home about their talents and bring the information to share.

- When parents come to visit at school, build a rapport with them and be interested in their activities and projects. Field trips are a great format for these casual conversations. Talk to parents while on the playground or when children are having free choice.
- At an open house, have the parents pair up and briefly interview each other to find out what they enjoy doing and what they feel they do well. Have them write down these skills for you to refer to later. Then introduce the parents to the group and mention their special talents. This will help them get to know each other and recognize common threads in the group.
- Projects that need individual help from parents provide an incentive for participation.
- Incorporate the occupations of the parents in your thematic planning.
- Find out where parents work and arrange field trips to visit their work, even if only to the outside.

CONCLUSION

I feel there is a tremendously heightened sensitivity and curiosity about students and their families that is awakened by participating in this work. This enhances my teaching as I allow children and parents to feel valued and use their knowledge in developing the curriculum. The children and parents feel more ownership in their school, build their self-esteem, and develop a stronger comfort level with the school. New teacher-parent relationships transcend the typical teacher-parent connection and foster a friend-to-friend interchange that creates a new bond of closeness and purpose. The families that participate enjoy being involved. They are empowered to use their skills and talents. The parents and children are interested because their ideas are used in the curriculum. Parents feel success with their efforts. They make a contribution and a difference. Finally, they feel pride in themselves and their accomplishments and feel valued and equal.

If teachers include parents and families in the formula for educating children and seriously listen to and value their funds of knowledge, we will turn the key that unlocks the door to a bright future for children and their parents.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How do home visits in the Funds of Knowledge project differ from traditional teacher visits to students' homes?

2. What does the author of this chapter mean by "parent participation is often poor"? How can the Funds of Knowledge project increase parent participation in schools?
3. What are some of the different models of parent involvement in schools?