

# **“Thinking Mindfully about Parent Involvement”**

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## Some questions I hope we can explore together today:

- 1) What does it mean to think mindfully about parents and parent involvement?
- 2) How will this process help us improve our outreach to and collaborations with the diverse parents we are not reaching?

## Some other relevant questions:

- How might thinking mindfully about parents result in more caring relationships with parents and children?
- How might thinking mindfully also enhance our cultural sensitivity towards parents and children?

# First, what is mindfulness?

According to Ellen Langer (2000) it means:


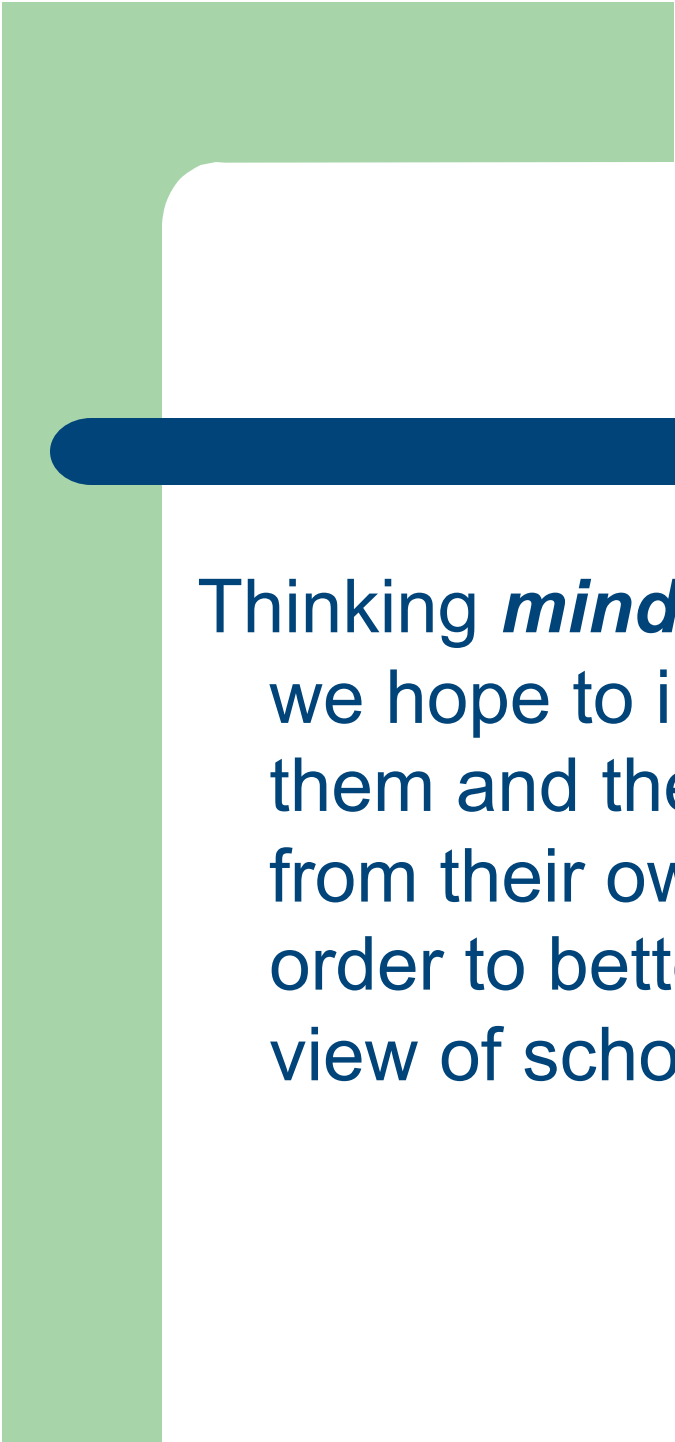
“a flexible state of mind in which we are actively engaged in the present, noticing new things and sensitive to context”

When we are thinking "mindlessly," about anything (e.g. a policy) or anyone (e.g. parents) we are often stuck in single perspectives or mind-sets that we may have learned or experienced in the past.

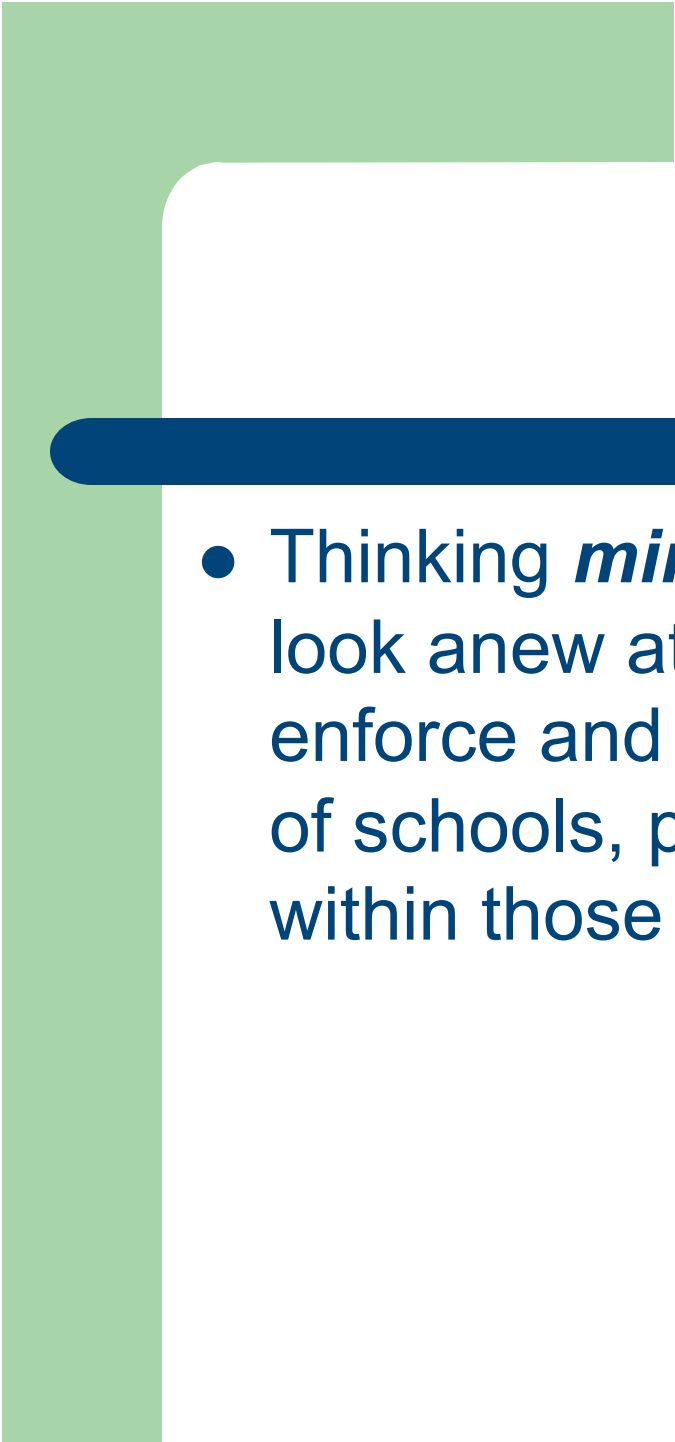

## Ritchhart and Perkins (2000) note:

- “Mindfulness means stepping out of those grooves to explore new territory, and that can be difficult to do at times” (p.45).

This is what I hope we can do today.



Thinking *mindfully* about the diverse parents we hope to involve means that we look at them and their families in a different way... from their own standpoint or perspective in order to better understand them and their view of schools and school policies.

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- Thinking *mindfully* might also mean that we look anew at policies we are asked to enforce and the assumptions about the roles of schools, parents and communities implicit within those policies.

## Some questions to get us started:

- What are some “**mindsets**” or single perspectives we might have about the NCLB policy and expectations?
- What are some “**mindsets**” we might have about parents who do not get involved in school activities?

## A question for reflection...

- What if parents in a community believe they are getting involved by *not* having their children do homework. What if they want to make a statement that “although families exist basically for children, they have their own needs, obligations, and policies (goals and practices) including children’s house chores, sleep time, and family activities (not family math) with which school homework interferes” (de Carvahlo, 2001, p. 128).

## What if as Lopez (2003) suggests:

Parent involvement consists of parent and community efforts for system reform and accountability? She believes that focusing on teaching parents individual skill building as tutors or advocates of a set policy often prevents them from dialogue and learning how to use their collective power to address what they see as common problems within the system (p. 3).

## deCarvahlo (2001) suggests that

“the main contradiction of parent involvement in schooling as a policy is that albeit wrapped as grassroots it is really top down” (p.10).

She goes on to say: Through formalization of homework within the family-school partnership, educational policy is regulating family life and socio-cultural life, an interesting case of extending the disciplinary power...of the school to children’s homes and to parenting activities” (p.132).

## **Elias and Schwab (2004)**

Reviewed all of the expectations of school parents today. In their analysis they suggested that in looking at all that parents must do to support their children's growth within a society that seems to thwart their efforts, schools should just support parents in being parents which in the long run would enhance academic development as well.

# How indeed do people usually define parent involvement?

Many States post the goals of parent involvement on websites as:

- receiving ideas and training from the school,
- learning about school programs,
- advocating for schools and volunteering
- becoming confident and competent in helping children learn and succeed academically

## But what if parents disagree?

- Reese (2001) e.g. found that for immigrant Latino parents the **main goal of education was thought to be moral and social development of children?**
  - So when schools say they prepare children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century many parents believe this means much more than academic success.
- Is there a place for parents to question the goals and policies of schools?

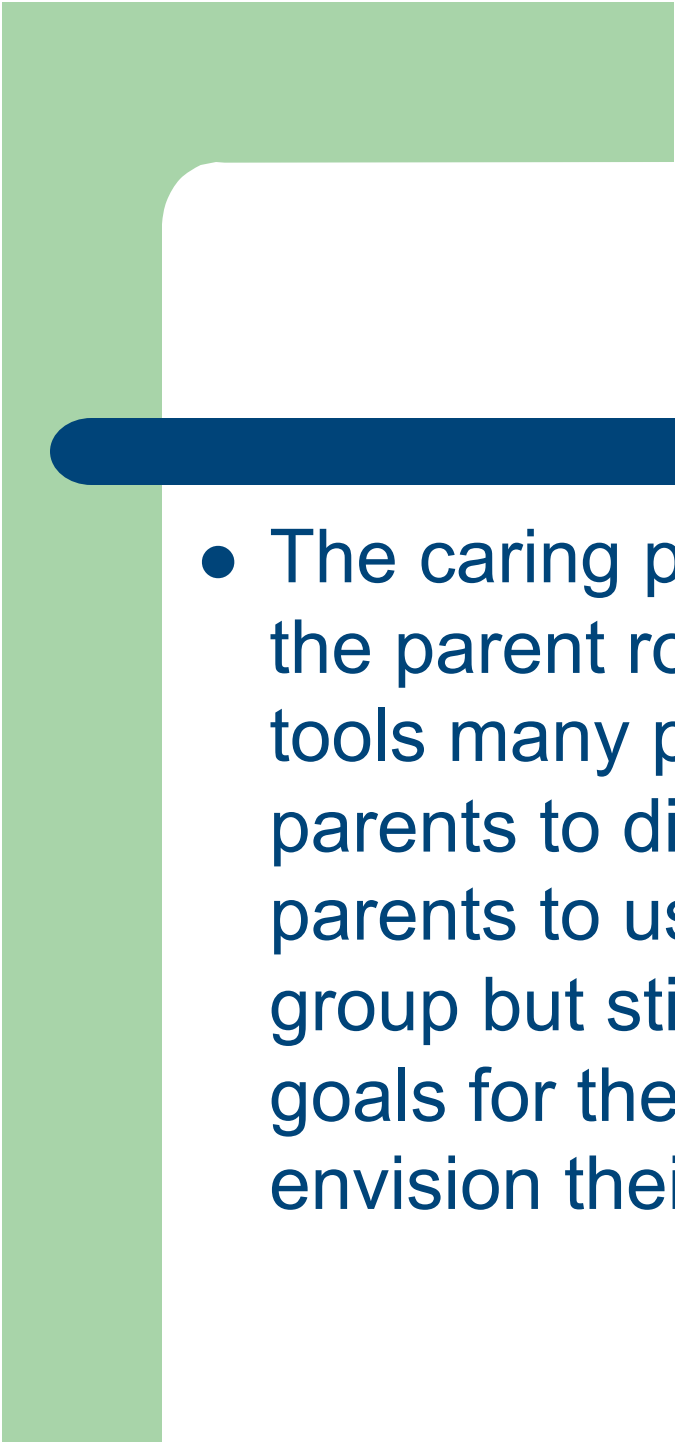

## The mindfulness-caring connection

This is where a caring process as a way of relating for administrators, teachers, parents and communities is helpful. Like mindfulness it involves looking at parents differently. Not just as teacher assistants and school advocates but as individuals with **goals** for their children, diverse **ideas** of the meaning of the parent role and parent involvement and what children need to learn and grow.



Mayeroff (1971) defined caring as “having another person’s growth and development in mind (p.1).

Yet many parents of all socio-economic backgrounds and cultures do not feel current school mandates with a focus on testing and learning facts help accomplish this goal.

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- The caring process of decision making and the parent role as seen in your handouts are tools many parenting educators use with parents to discuss such issues. They allow parents to use the support of an educator or group but still be able to talk about their own goals for their children and what they envision their role to be.

# Should we even discuss goals?

Gross suggests that parents' talking about goals "increases their confidence in their own ideas" (p. 182). But many parents are too stressed to parent effectively or have these kinds of discussions. So our role becomes linking parents to resources to help relieve that stress so they can do so.

## Challenge for administrators and staff:

- This may mean the increasing pressure on staff to address housing, mental and physical healthcare, educational, vocational, transportation, or legal needs of parents over-whelmed by the challenges they face daily. Ideally more funding for full-service schools could help greatly in this regard.

## **In discussing parents of special needs children, Turnbull et al. (1999) suggest:**

That the role of the professional is shifting from focusing just on the child to enhancing a parent's ability to develop a strong support system and changing the environment of families so that their quality of life is enhanced.

## Do parents of all children have goals for their children?

Yes, Goodnow and Collins (1990) explain that in all cultures, we can look at parents' **goals or standards for their children**. They also suggest looking at the actions and feelings associated with those parental ideas/goals.

# What do others say about goals?

Gross (1996, p. 178) tells us that:

“Parents across all 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

## Have all parents thought about their goals?

“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. ...many parents have never been asked” (Gross, p. 181).

Do we build this into our outreach to parents?

## Some questions to ask ourselves first?

- What competencies do you think children need to survive and be successful?
- What values would you want them to embrace?
- Has your staff had the opportunity to talk with parents about their goals?

## **We have known from Bloom and Krathwohl et al.'s (1964) work that:**

Any information we share with parents will be filtered through the affective domains of their own feelings, beliefs and values. Beaver (1983) found that the degree of commitment to a behavior is related to the degree to which a person has incorporated it into their value system.

## Almonte (1995/96) warns us:

“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.”

## Caring as an answer

How does caring help us to do this?

- Nel Noddings has said caring “involves stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s.” She adds “When we care, we consider the other’s point of view...his/her objective needs, and what he/she expects of us.(Noddings, 1984, p.24 ).

## What might impact a parent's unique point of view?

- A parent's ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, work status, gender identity, health, rural/urban upbringing, past and current neighborhood, social network, past and current family experience, impact of the larger societal context and the combination of all of these varied "cultures" may impact their ideas of school roles and parent goals.

## We also must think about diversity within diversity for our parents:

...the complexity of an **evolving cultural identity** affected by the immigration experience, possible changing socioeconomic status, changes in rural to urban experience or vice versa, level of trauma if in transition, possible unresolved grief, religious practices and traditions, changes in marital relationships, to name just a few more factors to consider.

## Fincham & Hall in their research concluded that:

“the ecological niche of the couple—their life events, family constellation, socioeconomic standing, and stressful circumstances—can no longer be ignored” (p. 225).

Parents need to be understood in social-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 that might impede children's success.

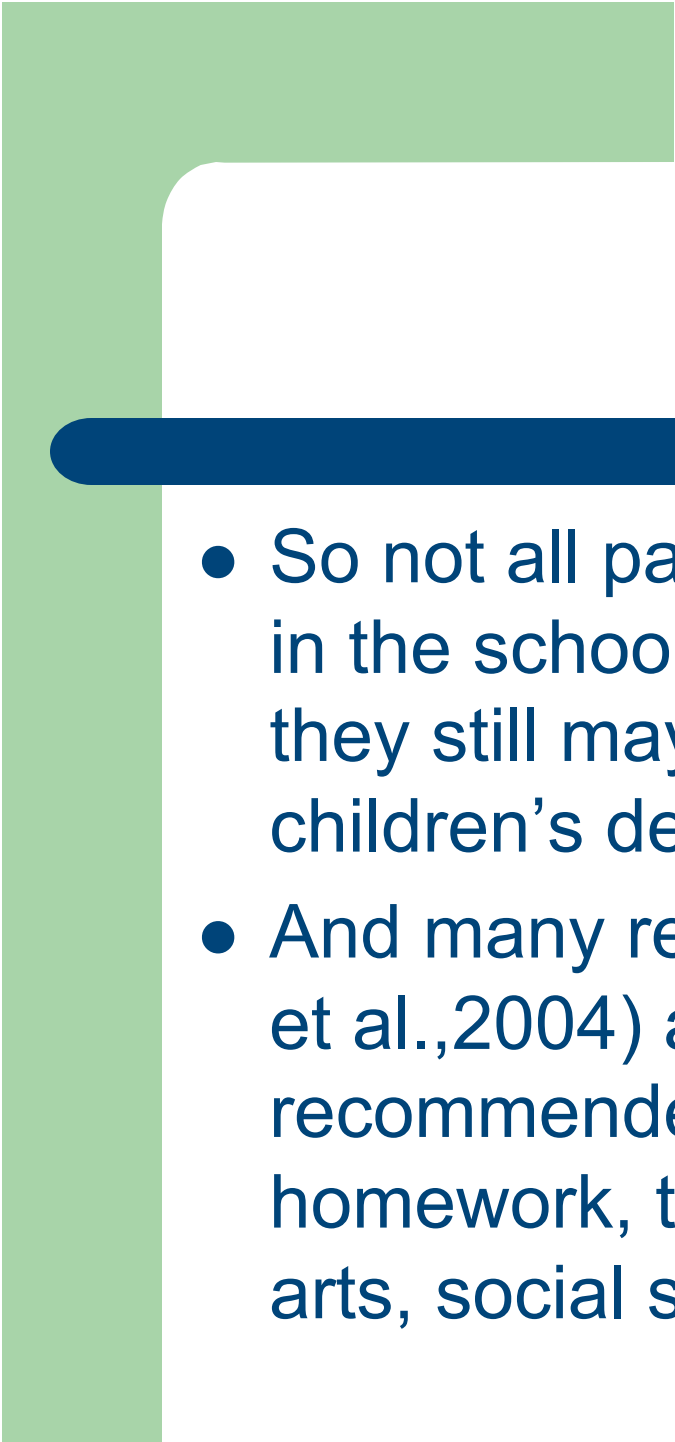

**We know that their culture is also a dynamic, changing system.**

Reading history and traditions of parents from different countries isn't enough. Those we serve continue to create their cultures. We need to look for the **meaning of people's behavior** in terms of their cultural background as well as their own **developing cultural identity**.

This demands our interest in exploring that **evolving identity** and finding culturally sensitive ways to do that.

## The goal is cultural pluralism:

“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)

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- So not all parents are willing or able to work in the school or help with homework though they still may believe they are furthering their children's development.
  - And many researchers and educators (Meier et al.,2004) also seriously question some recommended school practices such as homework, teaching to a test, eliminating the arts, social studies, recess, etc.

## So mindfulness involves looking anew at:

- Our own view of parent involvement
- Society's view of parent involvement
- Diverse parent views of parent involvement
- The reality of many parent's lives

This is preferable to just defaulting to our mindsets of expected parent involvement.

## Let us start with our own cultural view:

- How has your own past and present personal and cultural experience influenced your view of the parent role in schools?
- Please complete handout 1 asking about your own beliefs about the parent role and what you believe children need from parents/ caregivers to grow and succeed.

## Some questions to consider:

- How did your parents see their role in the school? How would/did you see your own role as a parent with school aged children?
- Were our parents or grandparents comfortable talking with teachers or taking on a teacher role at home?
- What else were you and your children expected to do at home besides schoolwork?

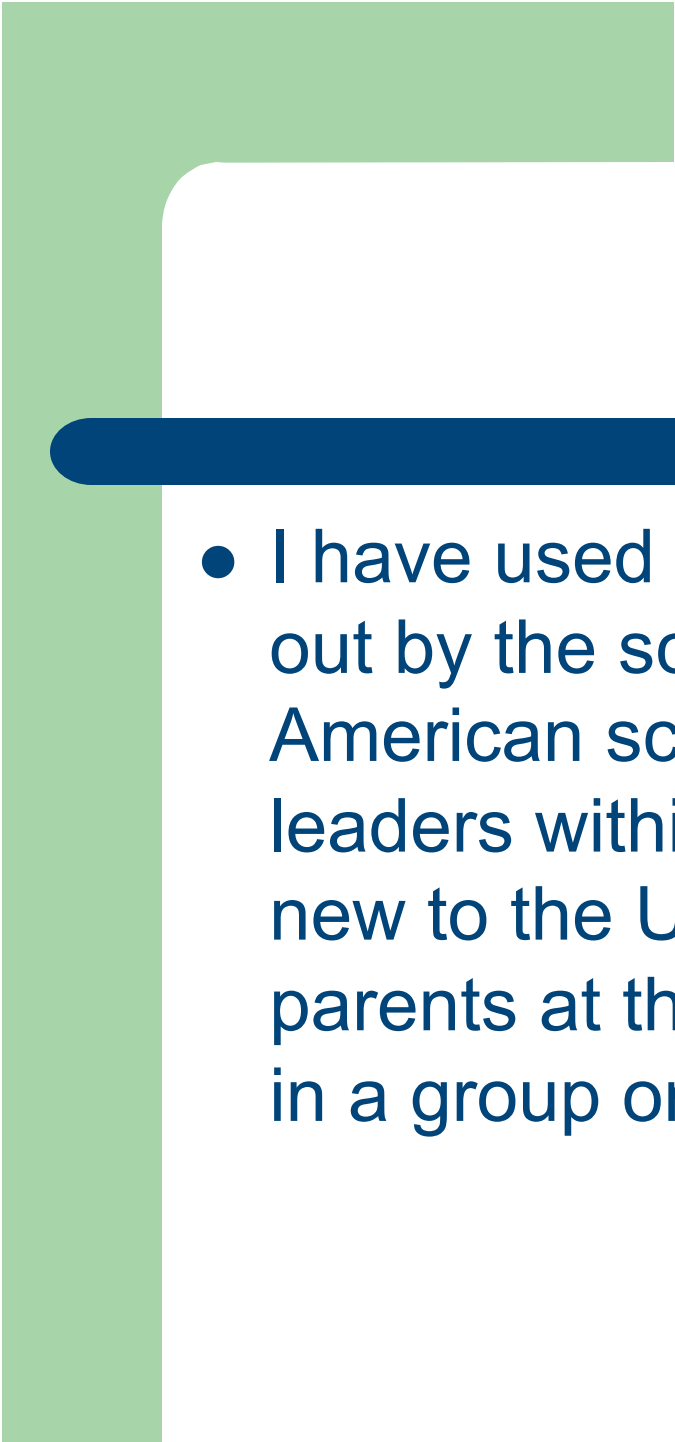

## Some parental perspectives:

- In many families and cultures it is the role of the parent to bring the child to school and the school does the academic teaching. When home a child is expected to learn about building relationships within the family and community.
- Many other cultures would be hesitant to question school authority even if they disagreed with school practices.
- Other minority parents fear visibility or singling themselves out even if they do disagree with school practices.

How do we take this information into consideration when trying to involve parents?

## Please refer to handout 2 asking parents similar questions

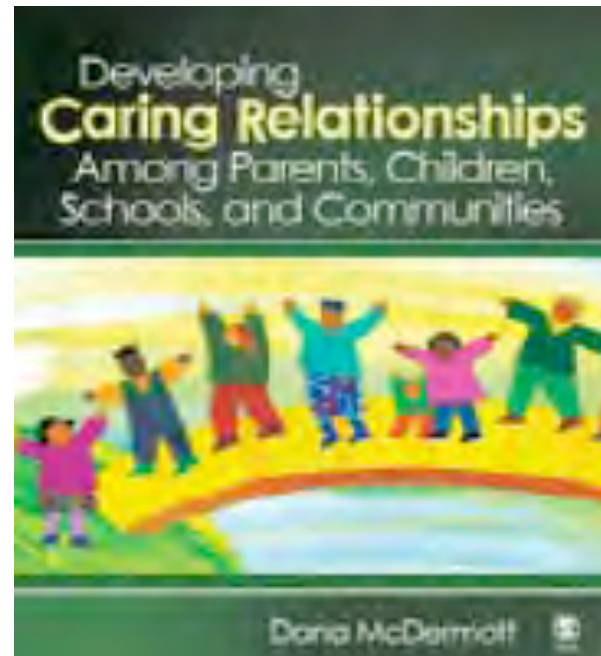
- This handout “Getting to know our parents” given to parents at the beginning of the school year is available on the Sage website Appendix for “Developing caring relationships among parents, children, schools and communities.” Please go to:  
[http://www.sagepub.com/  
booksProdSampleMaterials.nav?  
prodId=Book228935](http://www.sagepub.com/booksProdSampleMaterials.nav?prodId=Book228935)

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- I have used this either through a survey sent out by the school to parents familiar with the American school culture or through having leaders within a particular group of parents new to the U.S. pose the questions to parents at the start of the school year either in a group or written format.

# Why are questionnaires needed?

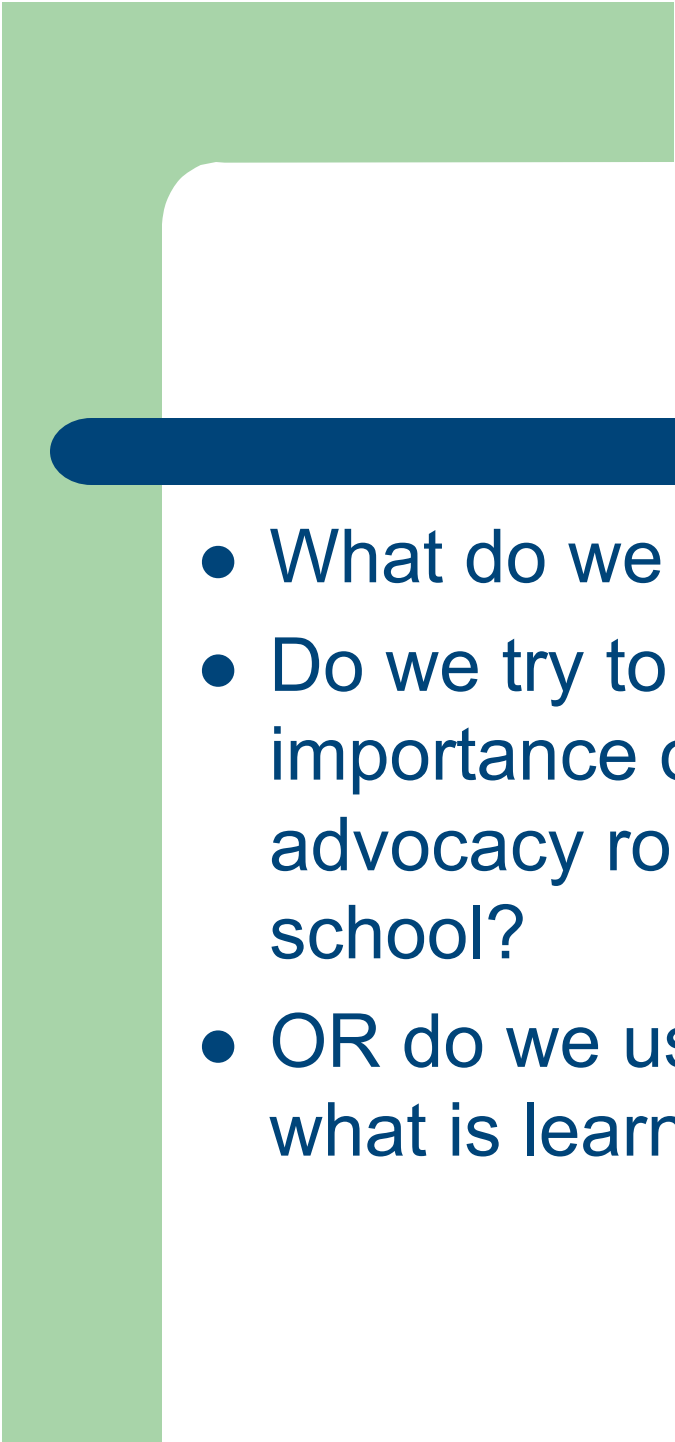

Many today are uncomfortable with lists of the way each cultural group acts or feels about such topics as child development or parent involvement to refer to in planning. It is more helpful to know the range of parent beliefs by getting to know an array of different cultures and designing a set of questions covering all their beliefs about children's needs and their role in helping children grow.


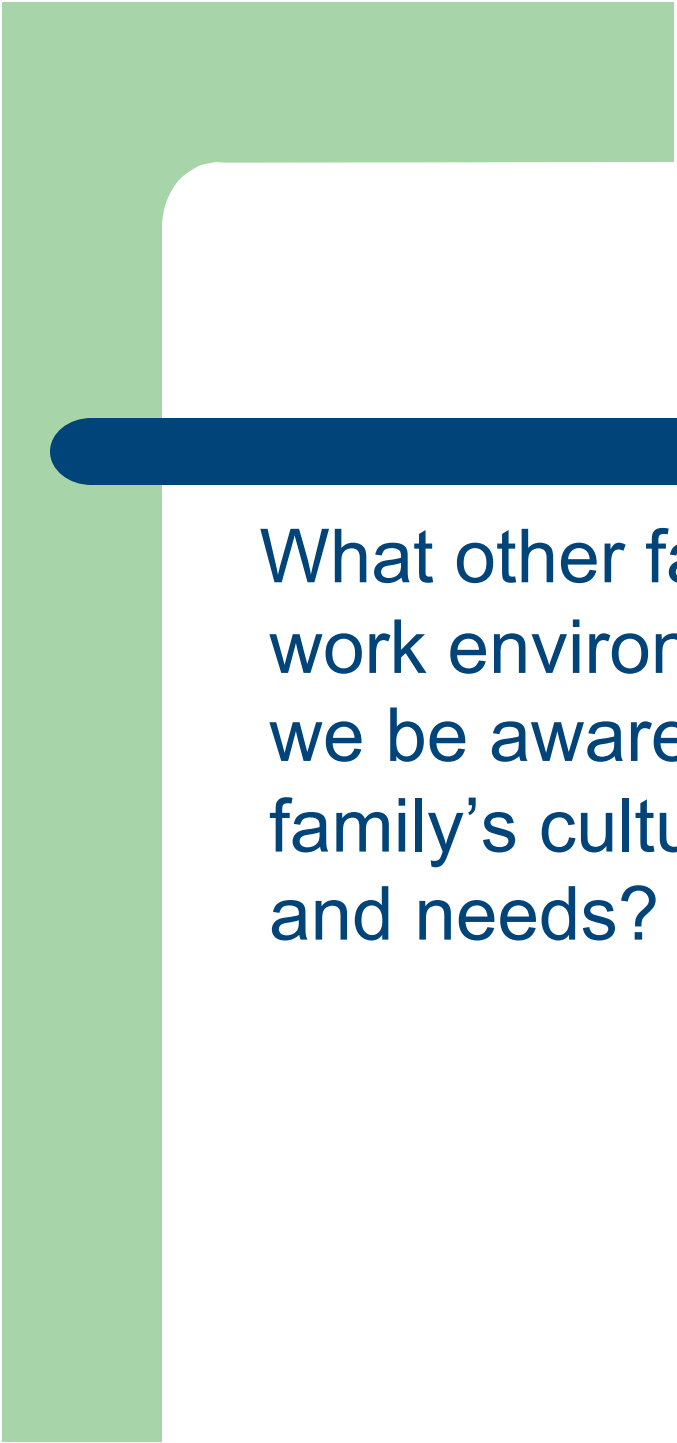
This is what I have done in chapter five of my book



# What are some of the ways diverse parents consider being involved in their child's development?

- Teaching them how to care for sibs and family members
- Getting them involved in Church, neighborhood and/or civic projects
- Sharing stories about family traditions
- Keeping them fed, clothed and safe
- Teaching them a trade or skills parents have learned themselves to survive including life skills
- Sharing leisure time together, getting involved in family activities, sports, arts, scouts, volunteering, neighborhood projects, etc.

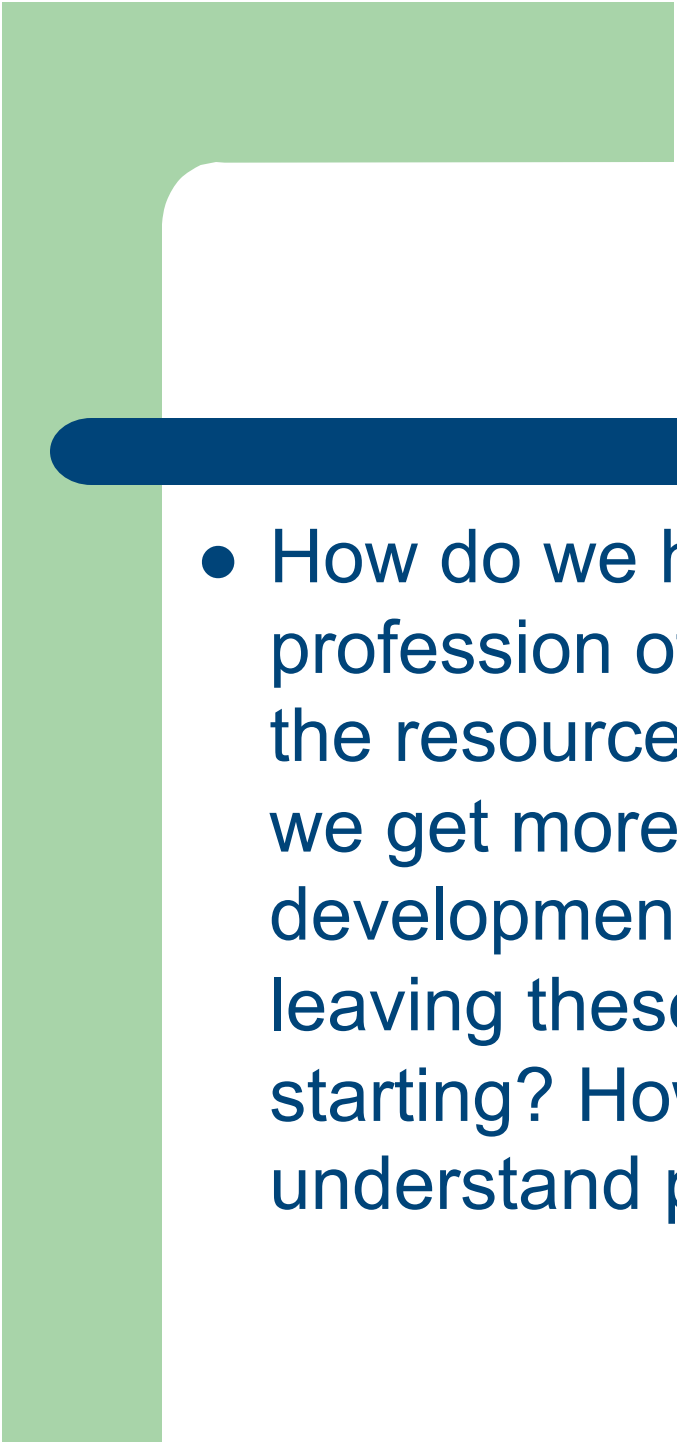

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- What do we do with this information?
  - Do we try to influence them as to the importance of homework, their teacher and advocacy role and in volunteering in the school?
  - OR do we use that information to rethink what is learned in schools?



What other factors, such as home/school/work environment or social supports should we be aware of that might interact with a family's culture to predict parent behavior and needs?

## Teacher's impact

- Graue (1999) researched new teachers on their attitude towards parents. She found they believed the school should define family involvement. They were suspicious of parents and felt they cared more about themselves than children if they did not do what was expected of them by the school.

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- How do we help young teachers new to the profession often working in schools that lack the resources they need to succeed? How do we get more resources for their professional development? How do we keep them from leaving these schools within a few years of starting? How do we help them better understand parents?

## **Siegel & Hartzell (2003) did this in their excellent book “Parenting from the Inside Out”**

They found that parents who have not reflected on how their own childhood experience affected their parenting may be dismissive toward their own child. Thinking mindfully we would ask about diverse parents “could parents be more effective in their role if they could better understand the impact of their past on their current parenting practice on themselves?”

## Through Shure's research (1992):

- We learned that if practitioners made space for inner city parents of four year olds to discuss their adult problems, consequences, and talk about each other's feelings, they were much more likely to use the same tools to help their children problem-solve as they had done for their own issues with school and parent educator support.

## **McConchie (2004) also found that success of parent initiatives depended on teacher perceptions of parents.**

He found

- school administrators and teachers feared partnering with parents as it could diminish principal's authority.
- They felt parents were not equipped to understand the school or system so should not have roles there.
- They felt professionalism was threatened when parents were involved in rethinking educational practices.

What do we do with this information?

### 3. Let's look at other factors that might interact with culture to impact parents:

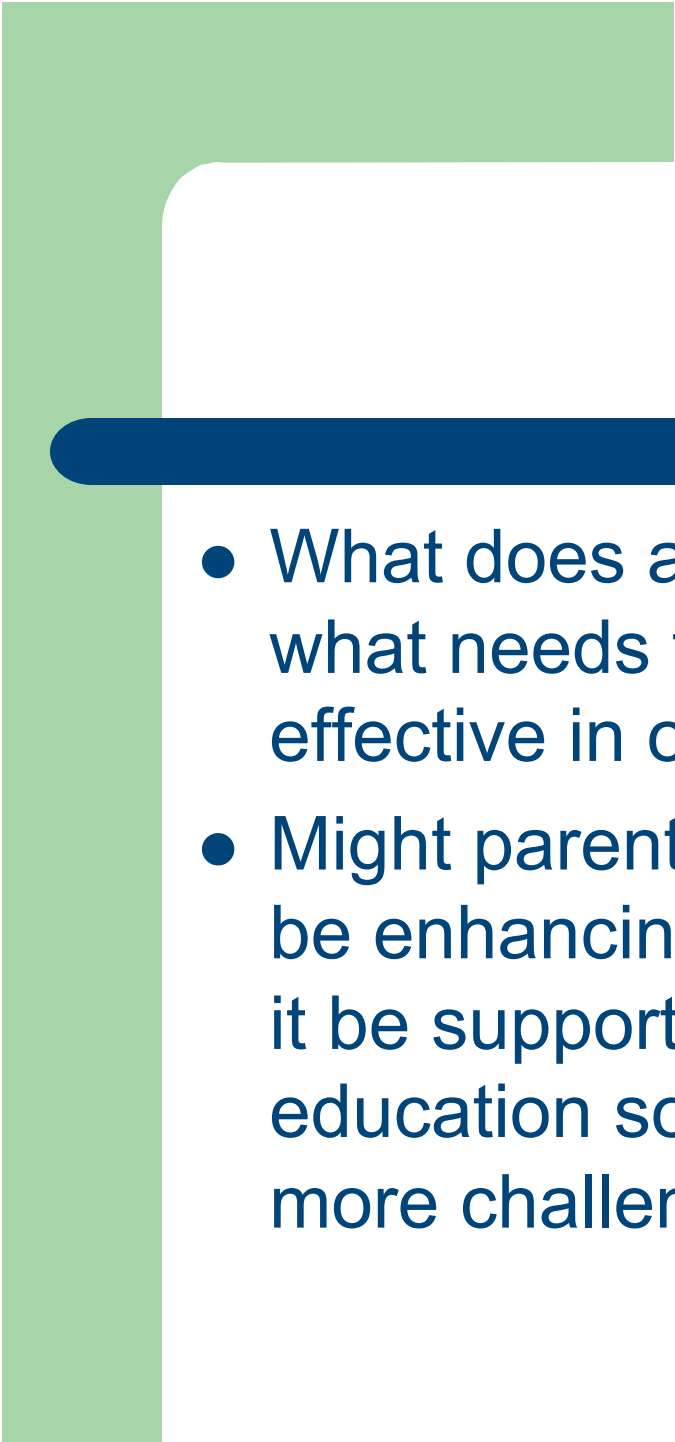

Conclusions based just on culture can miss many other variables, such as stress, that better explain parent behavior than culture by itself. E.g. research demonstrates that a parent's **work situation** may affect how a parent from any culture interacts with children at home and understands or practices their role.

## **Parcel and Menaghan (1994) e.g. found that:**

Mothers with more job complexity created more stimulating home environments for their children. Others (e.g. Kohn, 1977) have long found that parents would decipher what skills they needed at work to succeed and try to teach those to their children at home and hope they would be taught at school.

## What about support outside the home?

Burchinal, Follmer, and Bryant (1996) studied 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.**

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- What does all this research suggest as to what needs to be in place for us to be effective in our own goals?
  - Might parent involvement for some parents be enhancing their social networks? Or might it be supporting them in focusing on education so that they might get jobs that are more challenging?

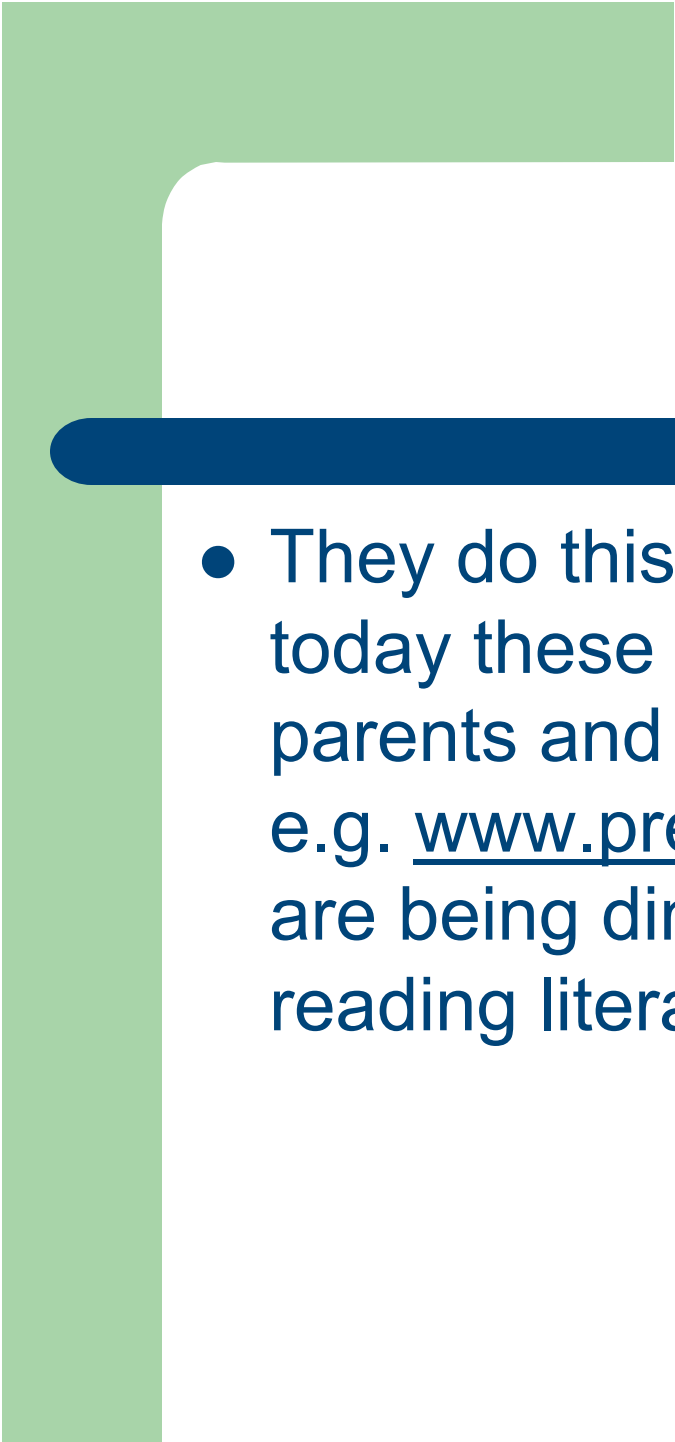

## Chess and Thomas (1999) in their classic work on temperament:

- Found that poor Puerto Rican children who lived in cramped quarters without access to safe places for physical exercise were more hyperactive at school and learned less. When those children moved to a home with a backyard they were more successful in school. Also, when Puerto Rican Psychologists tested them they were less likely to be categorized as having special needs.

How does that impact our school practices such as less or no recess time for children?

## **Hurtig in her work in a bilingual and bicultural school in Chicago:**

Brings immigrant moms into school to write about their past and present worlds including dangerous neighborhoods and few places for physical play which was so different from home. These parents are involved not necessarily by tutoring but by writing stories that are read aloud in community meetings and in classes. From this process they gain a voice and soon become child advocates.

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- They do this in social studies classes. Yet today these classes and others involving parents and focusing on what they do (see e.g. [www.preparetomorrowparents.org](http://www.preparetomorrowparents.org) ) are being diminished to focus on math and reading literacy.

## **Calabrese-Barton (2004) to engage some non-involved parents in their children's science projects:**

Invited parents to school and got them thinking about how they already did science in their past/present through farming, fishing, planting crops, sustaining family health, etc. This empowered them to feel they could offer their children help on science projects because they saw how science pervaded their everyday lives.

## Project Cornerstone's

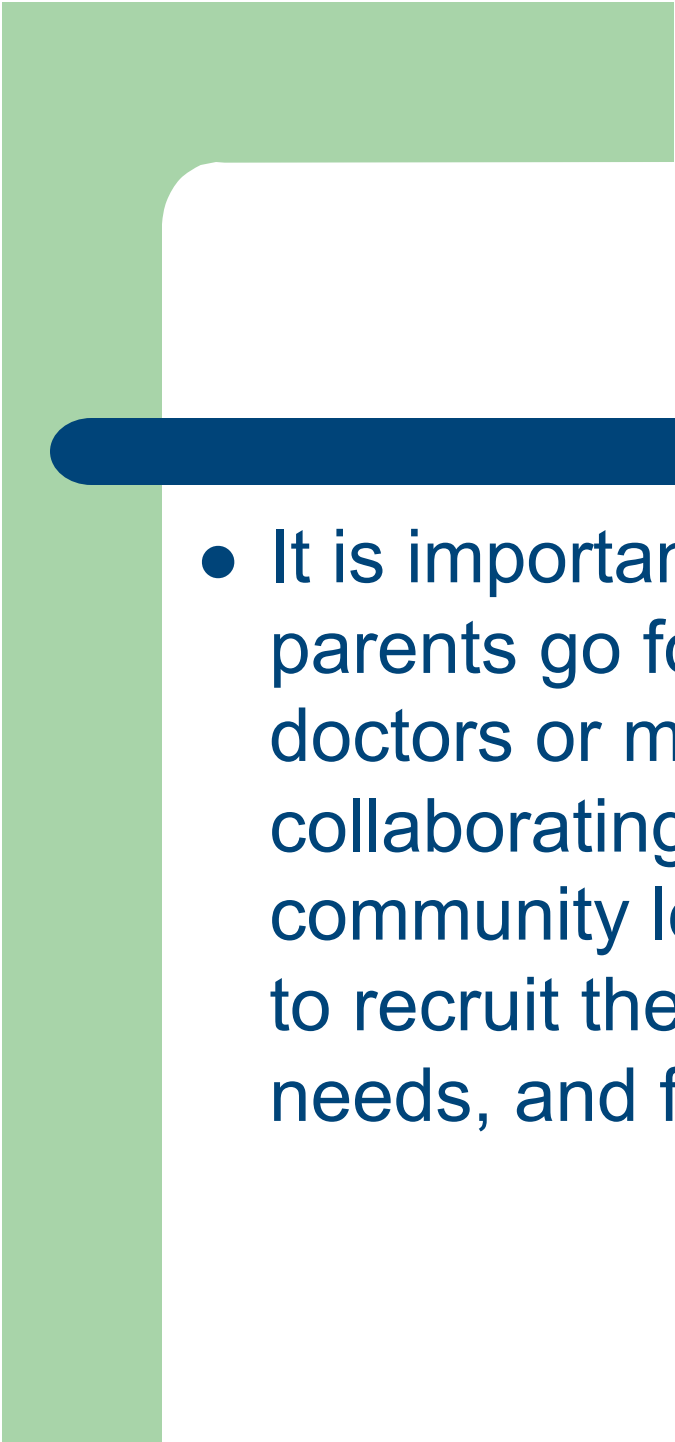

“Los dichos de la casa program” invites parents to come to class once a month to share cultural activities, the proverbs and wisdom of their homes and to read Spanish literature to children. (Teachers read the same book in English). Parents learned how the activity aligned with language arts, writing, listening, speaking and visual arts and learned they could have an impact on children.

## Brody et al. (1999)

- Found there was a positive relationship between African American mother's perceptions of adequate family finances and their parental efficacy and developmental goals for their children. When finances were adequate they had higher expectations of their children.

## **4. What else have we learned about offering to help families of diverse backgrounds?**

It is essential to speak with wise community leaders and/or 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. (See Bavolek handout for more suggestions on diverse outreach strategies).

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- It is important to understand where some parents go for advice. Many go first to doctors or ministers not schools. How are we collaborating with other professionals and community leaders to reach parents-not just to recruit them but to understand their beliefs, needs, and feelings?

## Sikkink and Hernandez (2003)

- Found that in many Latino families, church has provided an opportunity for parents who might feel alienated from schools to network with other parents of the same religion and sometimes higher socioeconomic status. The networking has often enhanced their social capital and support for their children's educational success.

## How should we talk with parents of diverse cultural backgrounds?

- We should use dialogue 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:

# What does dialogue look like?

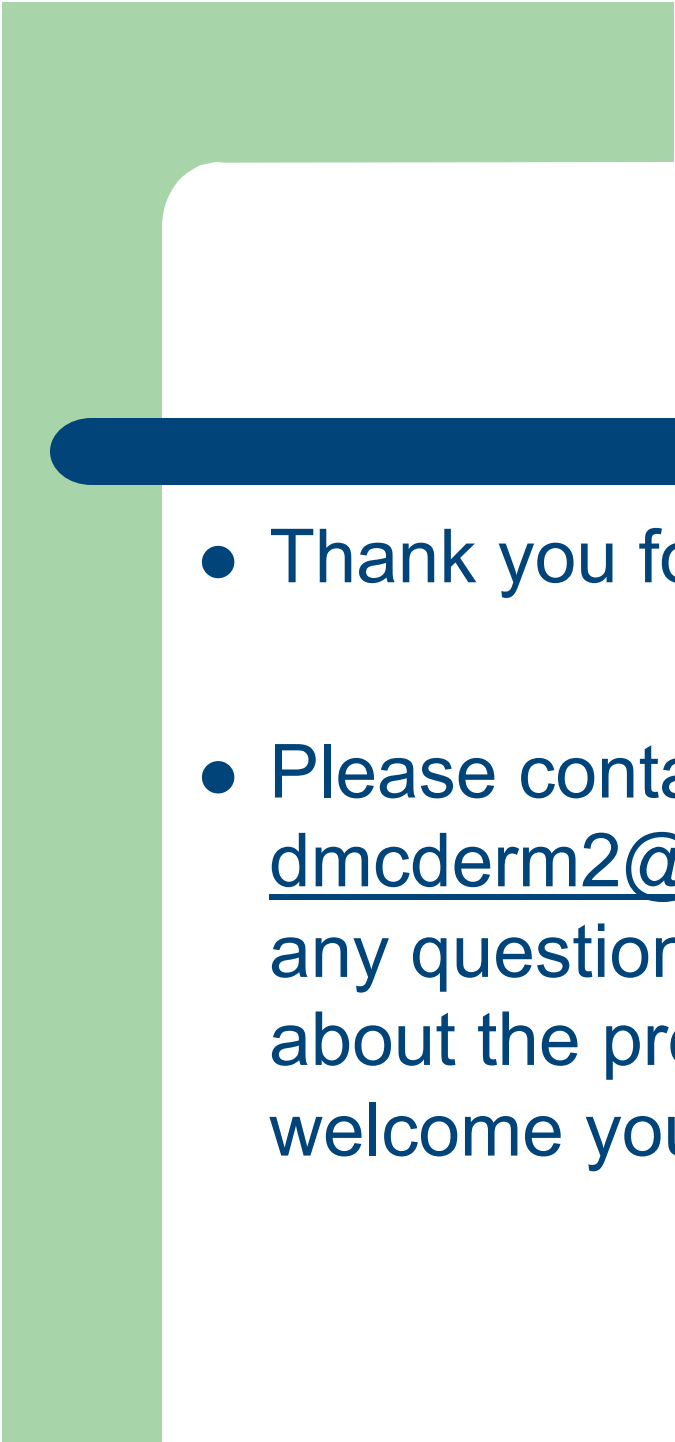

- The object of an argument is to win; the object of a dialogue is to gather information.
- The arguer tells; the dialoger asks.
- The arguer tries to persuade; the dialoger tries to learn.
- The arguer tries to convince; the dialoger tries to discover.
- The arguer sees two opposing views and considers hers the valid or best one; the dialoger is willing to understand multiple viewpoints. (pp. 3–4)

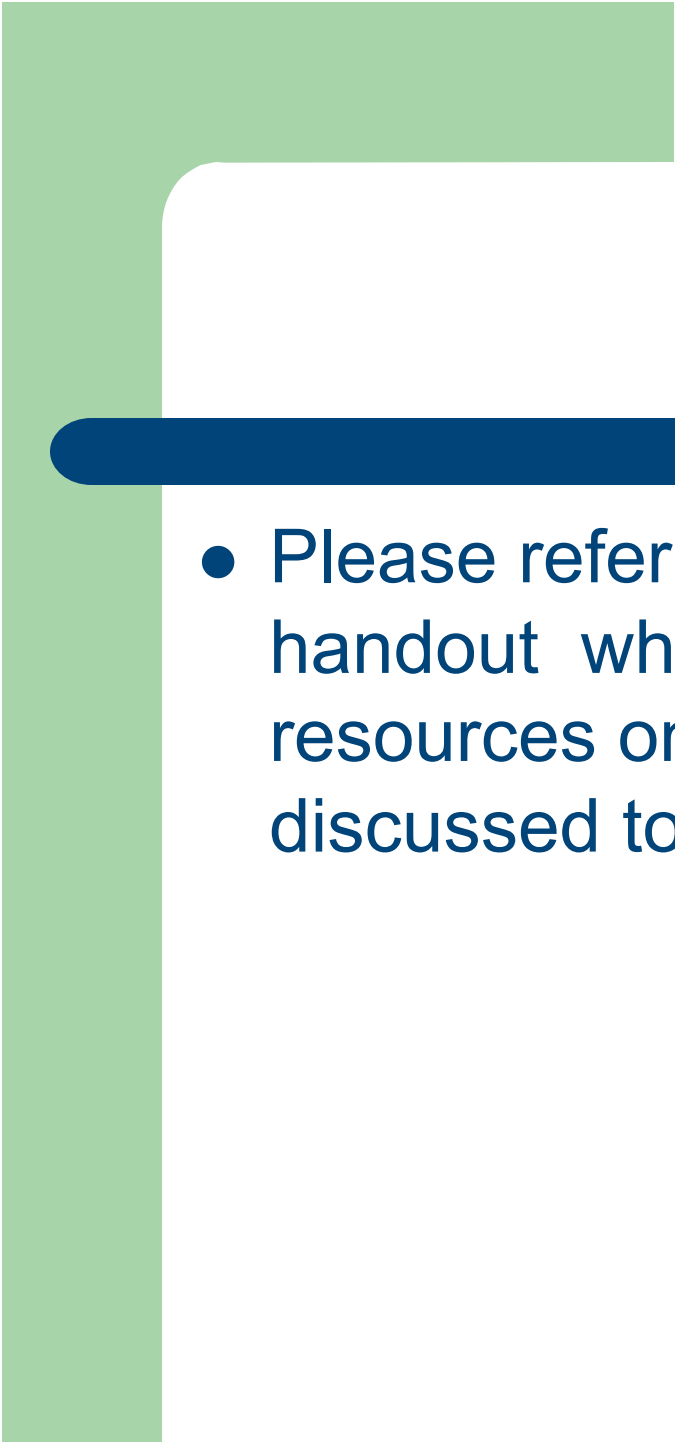

## 6. How can we apply this info to our own work?

Would dialoguing help us to be more mindful?  
Please write down one aspect of what was presented thus far (questions to ask ourselves and parents, a new idea, different approach to cultural competence) that might inform your work or that you would like to discuss further today.

## What are our conclusions about parent involvement ?

- It is not just about helping with homework or advocating for policies as they currently exist.
- It has different meanings for diverse parents.
- It may have to take on different forms and trajectories for some parents.
- It is not fixed but evolving.
- Your thoughts?

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- Thank you for your participation.
  - Please contact me at [dmcderm2@depaul.edu](mailto:dmcderm2@depaul.edu) or 312-362-5111 for any questions or comments you might have about the presentation or materials. I welcome your feedback.

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- Please refer to the references in a separate handout which also includes many other resources on cultural competence not discussed today.