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**Allen, JoBeth. (2007). *Creating welcoming schools: A practical guide to home-school partnerships with diverse families*. New York: Columbia University, Teachers' College Press**

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The thesis of this book is that, through true home-school partnerships, educators will be able to develop to a level of sufficient understanding and knowledge in order to create schools that are inclusive and welcoming. The partnership is explicitly directed toward improving the child's learning and development. The thrust is that the educator must first reach out and learn about and from parents, rather than only providing one-way information to them.

The book is well written and appears to be based on existing literature which is appropriately referenced. Starting with chapter 1 and continuing throughout the short book, the author provides practical suggestions to educators to begin developing the partnership process. In chapter 1 for example, Allen recommends that we begin by exploring our own memories of schooling, using the past to understand the present. She includes a scenario, so that we can easily follow her suggestion, and then provides an 'Action Opportunity' where the reader can lead a reflective follow-up activity, thus moving people along in the process of partnership-building. Allen offers various ways of building stories which are subsequently turned into cultural memoirs. She wants us, as educators or future educators, to reflect on our own cultural influences and what it means to form meaningful relationships with families from a variety of cultural heritages. "Sharing cultural memoirs is a way of looking past the 'surface homogeneity' to differences that make a difference and commonalities that make a community," Allen says (p. 31).

I especially enjoyed chapter 3, Learning with and from families. In order for educators to implement more culturally relevant teaching, Allen purports, we must learn about the families of the children with whom we teach. More specifically, we must learn about them in terms of their strengths and resources, considering them as assets or as coined from Gonzales, Moll, and Amanti (2005), "funds of knowledge." Moreover, through the action opportunity in this chapter, the author provides some clear cut steps that **may** be followed, with the codicil that only if it is culturally relevant. Chapter 4 continues to explore the concept of family funds of knowledge through photography or other, including visual, means. The action opportunity here asks us to reflect on

how that might help to support student learning—again, bringing us back from what we’re doing as to **why** we’re doing it. Home visits are another strategy recommended by Allen as a way of learning about and understanding the family context of the child.

Allen purports that creating dialogue is essential to any relationship, but it is very challenging. Accordingly, she devotes chapters 5 to 9 on various aspects of this topic. In chapter 5, true dialogue is explained according to Freire (1970) as an encounter in which people come to understand another’s perspective; it consists of the conditions of love, humility, faith, hope, and then critical thinking and action, explained by Allen who then provides some practical recommendations (and, of course, the follow-up action opportunity) for striving for true dialogue. Chapter 6 instructs us in dialoguing at parent-teacher conferences, where several useful suggestions are made: having the student present and leading the conference, using evidence to support the dialogue – evidence provided either by the parents or through student portfolios. Allen underscores the point made by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), that teachers must listen and listen closely to “really hear the voices and perspectives of parents” (p. 105) and the students. Chapter 7 explores different ways of creating dialogue through the year between educators and parents. Some easy-to-follow examples are given -- through open houses and welcome speeches to parents; through school-based family involvement projects such as having parents read storybooks in class, having family literacy nights, holding teacher-parent workshops to discuss and understand the books that their children are reading in school; and working with parents (of different cultural backgrounds) to support them in helping their children with homework. Chapter 8 offers more suggestions to educators for engaging families in communicating about their children and about their children’s learning and development throughout the year – e.g., having the parents tell/write the teacher about the child; through home reading journals, through oral and written family stories. Allen reiterates in yet another action opportunity that these are only suggestions, that the reader should remember to feel free to use any kind of forum that might facilitate the true dialogue between teachers and parents, about the children and their progress. Chapter 9 rounds out this topic of true dialogue by resonating how important it is to make the curriculum culturally relevant, and that one excellent way of ensuring this is the case is through engaging families (the student and the parents) in classroom projects. Some examples are having the students document their heritage (e.g., family trees, emigrating from one country to another, important events or objects in the culture), creating what Winston (1997) termed as family keepsakes, and engaging the children and their parents in what Ada and Campoy (2004) described as becoming authors in the classroom, and involving the students and their parents in both creating and then celebrating the process.

The remaining three chapters discuss some outcomes of fruitful parent-teacher partnerships. Chapter 10 describes ways that teachers, students, and family members have worked toward a more just and democratic society, as change agents. What I found to be quite energizing was the commentary on Vasquez’s (2004) **primary** students who engaged in education for democracy not only at school and community levels, but also at a more global level. Allen goes on to describe how academic service learning (ASL) is another vehicle to increase student engagement and learning while investigating the needs of their own community, working with parents (an oft-forgotten partner) and community leaders to study an issue and then to take collective action. Allen reminds the reader of the famous quote by Margaret Mead, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” (p. 138) Chapter 11 next focuses on parents acting advocates to help their children learn, and as active partners working with teachers to identify issues of relevance to them and their children which, once addressed, helped to stimulate true parent-teacher dialogue, and promoted student learning.

The final chapter ends with a discussion of first parent-school partnerships and then culturally relevant partnerships that result in the school’s transformation into an inclusive and welcoming school. Allen augments Swap’s 1993 framework for a true partnership between home and school, outlining Swap’s step-by-step approach to startup a joint project. Allen recommends following up

on King and Goodwin's (2002) recommendation that a project may be: one, carrying out a family survey and interviews; and then two, following up on the responses to begin making some of those changes in the school. Both elements, the seeking out for information and then the acting upon that information, must be incorporated into the project to have any impact on educators **and** parents. Yet, too often, only the first part is done (which is exactly what happened at my children's school). The proof of worthwhile parent-school partnerships is 'in the pudding,' so to speak. It's more than educators and parents talking about issues together; rather it's about their collective action to make change that all members of the partnership deem appropriate. This, in essence, is Allen's wisdom to the reader who may be a student of education, an educator, or a parent.

I recommend this book as a beacon not only to parents (to make them realize that many examples exist in the 'real' world about effective and respectful parent-school partnership), but also to educators, at all stages in their profession. Would-be educators must be made aware of the need to first reach and then to teach all their students; that means students who are widely diverse in terms of culture and race, abilities, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and interests. Teachers and administrators must show that they can and do learn from parents, are respectful of parents, and recognize that differences do exist and must be accommodated in terms of what is being taught, how it's being taught, and who is teaching it. This book makes these points very clear. Also the many examples, references, websites, and action opportunities in every chapter help to make the theory very practical. What's most important to me is that the author is making suggestions only, and that every suggestion requires some adaptation depending on the context. She has reminded the reader that there is **no** one best way, but many different and equally worthwhile ways of getting to inclusive and welcoming schools. The challenge is ours.

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