TODAY’S EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS

In 2003 the National Center for Educational Statistics estimated that approximately 40 percent of children in U.S. public schools are from culturally diverse backgrounds (population statistics put Caucasian or European decent at 67 percent in 2005). Yet only 22 percent of preschool teachers are culturally diverse (other than Head Start where 52 percent of teachers come from a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds).

Today individual families and children rarely fit simply into established cultural categories. Most children grow up in homes that contain elements of several cultures combined in nontraditional ways. Many families are multicultural communities in miniature. Some parents with one or more root cultures, internationally adopted children, or grandparents with diverse religions or sexual orientations. Which means classrooms and educational settings themselves can be a microcosm of our multicultural society.

Represented within the national program of Head Start are over 140 languages. Early childhood classrooms can have as many languages as there are children (sometimes more if a household has two home languages). Also, dialects of English and other languages. Language diversity in the United States has changed rapidly over the past three decades. The use of a language other than English at home increased by 148 percent between 1980 and 2009 and this increase was not evenly distributed among languages.

Our diverse society and the increasing diversity in today’s early childhood programs, means educators need to be attuned to the cultural and linguistic dimensions of relationships with families.

THINK ABOUT IT: CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

“Language is the carrier of culture and culture is the content of language.” (Kuang, 2007, p.75)

“A language is part of culture, and a culture is part of a language.” (Brown, 2007, p. 133)

These quotes invite us to reflect on the relationship between culture and language. Also, to wonder how this relationship affects families. What is your reaction to these quotes? How do these quotes relate to families?

THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP OF CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

Simply the way any language is constructed conveys information about the people that use a language. Are certain words engendered with masculine or feminine such as the “a” and “o” in Spanish? Do nouns come before or after verbs (and what might this convey)?

All of us come to understand our world through language and culture. How could we interpret our experiences? As young children acquire language skills, they develop an understanding of cultural values and expectations.

The adults in a child’s life will model and communicate roles, norms, and the language of their culture. This might include language codes (for example, pacing, turn-taking, and dialects), non-verbal communication (such
as, gestures, proximity, and eye contact) and communication styles (story formats, duration of silences, length of speeches, humor, prayers, etc.).

**Culture**

First, let us examine culture more closely. Cultural diversity is a term used to identify differences. Differences between people can be explained in any number of ways, temperaments, personalities, trauma, gender, etc. Culture is one of several lenses we can look through to understand differences.

“Every individual is rooted in culture” (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010, p. 11). Yet finding a definition for this word that we all can agree upon or even one that the research field is consistently using is challenging. For the purposes of this session, we will look at the components of culture and the developmental lens.

**COMPONENTS OF CULTURE**

A clear and consistent message of cross-cultural researchers is that the self or one’s identity is constructed within social and cultural contexts. The boundaries that define a self, therefore, are both different and constructed differently across cultures. Individuals begin to develop their sense of self—learn who they are and how to interact with others—within the context of their family.

These ways of behaving and interacting change over time, and the contemporary environment (such as technology) influence them. Regular practices and bodies of knowledge are part of the definition of _funds of knowledge_; this will be discussed in-depth later.

In some cultures, power derives from social networks; for others, the quantity or quality of possessions confers differing degrees of power. Additionally, diversity is a comparative term referenced to a normative group, typically a group perceived as holding social and/or economic power. By definition, experiences of powerlessness tend to be more common in groups designated as diverse.

Time can be perceived as a linear construct or more fluid. In cultures that view it more linearly, being on time for meetings may be valued. For others, being present and engaged wherever you are may be more highly valued than timely arrival.

The reciprocal nature of culture and language was discussed earlier. The first language children learn becomes a part of their cultural identity. The structure of language such as the grammar, syntax, use of pronouns and nouns often reflects the culture that uses the language.

**CONTINUUM OR SPECTRUM**

Research looking at differences among cultural groups sees different cultures on a continuum or spectrum from individualistic to interdependent (also called “sociocentric” or “collectivist”). According to the authors of _Bridging Cultures Between Home and School_, “At the most basic level, the difference is one of emphasis on individual success versus successful relations with others in a group. It could be characterized as the difference between ‘standing out’ and ‘fitting in’,“ (Trumbull et al, 2001, p. 5).

The goal in cultures labeled _individualistic_ is individual fulfillment, and to aid in reaching this goal, children are encouraged to make choices and to strive assertively to achieve them. The goal in _sociocentric_ cultures is the well-being of the group, and personal assertiveness can be frowned on to the degree that it upsets group harmony.
Although mainstream U.S. culture emphasizes individualism, most groups immigrating to the United States are from cultures with a more interdependent value orientation.

As educators, we must understand the cultural dimensions underlying a child’s sense of self and how it affects their behavior. By identifying how a child or family understands autonomy and to what degree group interaction and cooperation are valued we can begin to develop educational goals that are culturally responsive and effective.

VIDEO: REEL TO REAL: EXPLORING CULTURE AND EMOTIONS

The video Reel to Real: Exploring Culture and Emotions (10:37) highlights the cultural and linguistic diversity of many early childhood programs by highlighting one program in Palo Alto, California. A psychologist describes the way culture influences expression of emotions.

As you watch, reflect on these questions:

- How are language and culture represented in your program?
- How might knowledge of cultural influences on emotions affect your work with families?
- What other aspects of interaction may be influenced by culture?

AT WHAT AGE SHOULD A CHILD…

In this photo, the woman is pointing to a diagram of what to put on first, then second, and so forth to go outside in Alaska during the winter. She is reviewing this with a child. Children can do these things independently at different times, though generally around the same age give or take six months. What about these:

- Say first word
- Stop biting
- Stop whining
- Share materials or toys
- Take turns
- Describe feelings
- Feed self
- Toilet train
- Sleep alone
- Walk
YOUR TURN: CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURE

The purpose of this activity is to explore your assumptions around child development and what are cultural developmental expectations for young children.

Think about your own upbringing, children you know, or experiences you have had, and respond to the following prompts:

At what age do children typically:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Approximate Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sleep by themselves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feed themselves</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take first steps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm themselves when angry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand spoken language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to read</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take turns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk about feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow directions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coo at a caregiver</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the toilet independently</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FILTERS OF DEVELOPMENTAL EXPECTATIONS

Although there are generally agreed upon milestones for growth and development, our culture determines our expectations for specific behaviors and interaction patterns. Culture and the experiences that are valued for young children within any culture largely influence their development.

For example, in some cultures or communities it is considered unsafe for an infant to be placed on the floor (Harkness & Super, 1996). This may be due to health concerns related to cold floors, safety concerns related to infant exploration, or safety concerns related to foot traffic in busy homes with many inhabitants. Families from such cultures may not see tummy time or crawling as a safe experience for their child. This could create a division between program expectations and family priorities.

Language is another example. Cultural beliefs vary widely about the value of talking to infants and toddlers. In some cultures, people believe that infants and toddlers do not speak or understand language (Jones & Lorenzo-Hubert, 2008). Therefore, adults may consider it inappropriate to talk to infants or young toddlers. Culture heavily influences the ways adults and very young children interact. Culture also determines concepts such as politeness, manners, talking-back, and following directions.
Language

Now, we take a closer look at language, a key component of children’s identity formation. We start with a brief review of the role of language and a big picture view of how to support a family’s preferred language.

THINK ABOUT IT: A FAMILY’S LANGUAGE

Consider the different terms for a family’s language (when it is other than English or dominant language spoken in a society): Native language, first language, home language, mother tongue, preferred language, or heritage language.

What are some other terms?

Which term do you use and why?

What do you think when families speak languages other than English or dialects (of English) at home?

ROLE OF LANGUAGE

Language is not only a tool for communication and connection but also a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment, both for the individual and the group. Embedded in language are cultural beliefs and values that connect a child to his or her cultural past through oral traditions, literary forms, music, history and customs conveyed in the primary language.

Respect for the languages of those belonging to different linguistic communities seems essential in early childhood, whether it is a dialect or a different language. Development of a healthy ethnic identity is tied to maintaining one’s primary language or mother tongue.

Many researchers and anthropologists highlight how the home language symbolizes a deep, abiding, even cord-like connection between speakers and their cultural identity. “Indigenous scholars in Canada (Kirkness, 2002), the United States (Greymorning, 1997), and New Zealand (Harrison & Papa, 2005) make frequent reference to connections between language, community, place, and time.” While most parents want their children to get a good education, parents also hope that their children will maintain their love and respect for their heritage language and culture, and for their home community. As one parent said: “it is important to teach our children to read and write, but is more important to teach them to be proud of themselves and of us” (Delpit & Kemelfield, 1985, p.25).
YOUR TURN: REFLECT ON PERSPECTIVES

Review the following excerpt from an essay by Lisa Delpit (1990), *Language Diversity and Learning*. Reflect on your experiences in the classroom and with families and the opening scenario:

A brand-new black teacher is delivering her first reading lesson to a group of first-grade students in inner-city Philadelphia. She has almost memorized the entire basal-provided lesson dialogue while practicing in front of a mirror the night before.

"Good morning, boys and girls. Today we’re going to read a story about where we live—in the city."

A small brown hand rises. "Yes, Marti."

Marti and this teacher are special friends, for she was a kindergartner in the informal classroom where her new teacher-student taught.

"Teacher. How come you talkin’ like a white person? You talkin’ just like my momma talk when she get on the phone!"

I was that first-year teacher many years ago, and Marti was among the first to teach me the role of language diversity in the classroom. Marti let me know that children—even young children—are often aware of the different codes we all use in our everyday lives. They may not yet have learned how to produce, those codes or what social purposes they serve, but children often have a remarkable ability to discern and identify different codes in different settings. It is this sensitivity to language and its appropriate use upon which we must build to ensure the success of children from diverse backgrounds.

How it might feel if the language you speak at home was not an officially recognized language?

What might be helpful to this child, to the teacher, and to the family?

THE BIG PICTURE OF SUPPORTING A FAMILY’S LANGUAGE

In order for educational programs to support children learning the *mother tongue*, it takes multiple stakeholders and resources working together. Any good examples of an effective, sustainable, and evolving heritage mother tongue based bilingual education program in the early years results from the intersection of many of these elements, including government policy, political will, language activism, parent demand, community involvement, teacher training, resource development, and cultural pride.
Early childhood and school initiatives that are strongly rooted in the children’s families and communities are more likely to be effective. When parent demand is the impetus for the instigation of language programs, there is a higher success rate (Ball, 2011). Whether children successfully retain their mother tongue while acquiring additional languages depends on several interacting factors. Studies show that six to eight years of education in a language are necessary to develop the level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for academic achievement.

In addition, research increasingly shows that children’s ability to learn a second language (or more) does not suffer when their mother tongue is the primary language of instruction in the early grades. Fluency and literacy in the mother tongue provides a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning other languages. When children receive formal instruction in their first language early and then gradually transition to academic learning in the second language, they learn the second language quickly. If they continue to have opportunities to develop their first language skills in school, they emerge fully bilingual (or multilingual).
Educators’ Roles, Self-Knowledge, and Reflection
This section is an opportunity for you to reflect on your roles as educators, on your own cultural identities, and the intersection of who you are as an educator and who you are culturally.

ROLES WITH FAMILIES

We begin with a look at the learner and researcher roles. A different session is devoted to developing partnerships with families and how to do this. As a learner and researcher, you learn about yourself and the families you serve.

Teachers’ beliefs may influence the amount and kinds of information they gather, the way they go about gathering it, and the meaning they make of it. Specifically, when teachers believe that family information helps them better teach children, and that staying apprised of this information is part of one’s job, teachers tend to be more receptive to families and seek out information.

When the teachers become teacher-researchers themselves, experiment with new ways of bridging cultures, modify and adapt their practices, then report the results to others, it can keep their own thinking fresh and help others to learn from their experiences.

VIDEO: PURCELL-GATES—LEARN FROM COMMUNITIES

In the following video, Purcell-Gates—Learn from communities (2:08), pay attention to how the speaker frames the school and educator roles.

Video Debrief
• How does she frame parent involvement?

• What does she see as the teacher’s role?

MIRRORS AND REFLECTIONS

Read the following quote and reflect on what this means to you.

Parker Palmer ... His words “we teach who we are” highlight the challenge posed by our own identities and roles as cultural, social, and psychological beings focusing on inspiring learning.

(Barrera, I. & Kramer, L., 2012, p. 5.)
Does this statement mean you should only work with children and families who hold the same cultural values as you? Alternatively, that you try to become more self-aware to better work with those different from you?

“Most importantly, educators need to be sensitive to how their own cultural experience shapes their perspective and to realize that multiple perspectives, not just their own, must be considered in decisions about children’s development and learning.” (Copple & Bredecamp, 2009, p 13.) The research discusses how culturally responsive teachers reflect on their own cultural perspectives and respect other perspectives. The research also indicates that self-reflection activities should be included in teacher education programs. When educators learn how to reflect upon their own cultural identities they are better able to understand other cultures. Self-reflection when consistent can provide a way to inquire into diverse cultures and then infuse those into the curriculum.

Unfortunately, research suggests that some teachers hold preconceived attitudes about families and believe they are indifferent to their children’s education. Educators may hold biases and often negative perceptions regarding the values, attitudes, and abilities of less educated and low-income parents in particular, which serve to reinforce stereotypes and can impede efforts to involve families.

If the educator holds the belief that the family is the child’s first teacher and that the interactions at home foster the student’s learning at school, then families are likely to be responsive to interactions with the teacher. Educators are in a powerful position to influence the nature of family involvement and must first look to themselves when engagement does not occur.

THE ICEBERG CONCEPT OF CULTURE

According to the U.S. Department of Education:

“Much of a person’s ways of thinking and acting are formed by their culture, but individuals within the culture may not be aware of their culture’s influence on their interactions with others. This is as true of educators as it is of parents and students. For family and community engagement efforts to succeed, educators must be aware of how their cultural lens affects their views of family and community members as partners in education.”

This visual of an iceberg you may have seen before. It illustrates the concept of how many aspects of culture are below the surface. Most of us do not realize how many of our thoughts and reactions come through a cultural lens. The teacher who views a student’s lively participation as wonderfully appropriate and shares this with the parent. While “the parent interprets the teacher’s comments about his daughter’s actions in class through his cultural lens for ‘rules of conduct’ (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). He envisions appropriate behavior as sitting quietly, observing in class and not calling attention to oneself. He worries that his daughter has behaved inappropriately. When the teacher understands the parent’s cultural lens, she is able to see the parent as concerned rather than disinterested.”

“Viewing interactions from the families’ perspective helps educators work more effectively with them. Canter & Canter (1999) suggest that it is helpful for educators to ask themselves guiding questions to increase the positive effects on their work with families.
Examples of the questions: ‘If I had a child in school, what specific information would I want to hear from the teacher at the beginning of the year?’ Or, ‘how and when would I want to be approached about a problem?’

It is equally important for educators to consider how they will provide information to families in a multi-cultural environment. Sensitivity to cultural differences will help prevent the formation of roadblocks that keep the members of the school community from working effectively together.”

“Educators’ beliefs about family and community engagement are critical to their success in working productively with families: Families in general – and those from diverse cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds in particular – often wait for guidance from educators before interacting with the school (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).”

REFERENCES


Kirkness, V. (2002). The preservation and use of our languages: Respecting the natural order of the creator. In B. Burnaby, & J. A. Reyhner (Eds.), Indigenous languages across the community (pp. 17-23). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University, Center for Excellence in Education.


You for Youth. (2016) Iceberg Metaphor. [Website]

Cite this source: