
CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON EARLY LANGUAGE AND LITERACY TEACHING PRACTICES

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Lisa and Danielle were coteachers in a 2- and 3-year-old classroom. They enjoyed working together most of the time, but occasionally what seemed like minor issues caused them to make some pointed comments that silenced them both. For example, Lisa believed the children were too young to be handling scissors during art projects and would observe aloud, "They don't know how to cut anyway." Danielle would respond by rolling her eyes and saying, "Well, that is exactly why the children should be using scissors. They need to practice to learn how to use scissors." Setting out food also seemed to elicit a minor conflict. Lisa set up a very generous table full of goodies for the children to snack on. Danielle would often comment that it offered too many choices for the children. She was also concerned that "children waste too much food." Lisa would then counter with her view that snack time should be a fun activity that stimulated language. "Besides, why are we saving food? There is plenty of food, and if not, we can buy some more."

Introduction

Lisa and Danielle get along most of the time and are good friends outside of the work environment, but what seem to be minor issues can leave them rolling their eyes and unable to see each other's point of view. They get exasperated with what they perceive to be the other's illogical way of thinking. Why? Their own upbringing and their cultural perspectives about children influence their perceptions of even everyday activities such as using scissors and eating snacks. We all bring specific values, beliefs, and

assumptions about child-rearing and child development to our work with infants and toddlers. Even two colleagues who share same ethnic culture may not share the same beliefs about what's best for very young children, what experiences they need, and what our expectations for their development should be. Conflicts around these issues will, quite naturally, arise with our colleagues and the parents of children in our care. Learning how to recognize the other's point of view and come to some shared solution is critical in providing high quality care to infants and toddlers.

abstract

Children learn to communicate in the context of their home culture. Beginning at birth, children use their home language and culturally accepted communication styles to connect with others in a meaningful way, forming secure relationships that are intrinsic to healthy development. For the early childhood teacher, it is important to establish supportive, respectful relationships as well—with both families and children. These connections help teachers learn more about the strengths, needs, and culture of every child in their care. Collaborative relationships with families also provide teachers with the information they need to support children's individual language and literacy development. By creating a richly diverse and welcoming environment, by remaining aware of their own cultural beliefs (and biases), and by identifying a variety of teaching strategies to share the magic of print and language, early childhood teachers can spark a lifelong love of reading in the children they care for.



PHOTO: JANET BROWN MCCrackEN

How we view the world is shaped by the beliefs, values, and experiences of prior generations of our respective families. Each generation has refined its sense of what is most important for children to know, believe, value, and do to ensure survival of the cultural and social community. This unique family culture is passed on to the new generation through the stories that are told to children and through the family and community's child-rearing practices. As we grow, our individual experiences and interactions also impact the cultural lens we use to understand the world around us. In this way, we are products of our family and community history, our environment, and our upbringing.

Links to Early Language and Literacy Skills

Culture shapes our expectations of what children can—and should—know and do at various ages. These beliefs influence how we interact with children in early childhood programs. And the curriculum choices we make based on our beliefs become part of children's life stories, affecting their skills, motivation, and excitement about language and literacy learning.

Researchers have identified five knowledge bases needed for teaching in a diverse classroom; learning more about each of these can support teachers' efforts to promote children's literacy and language learning from birth to age five. These knowledge bases include: self-knowledge,

cultural knowledge, linguistic knowledge, culturally informed teaching knowledge, knowledge of multicultural materials and literacy methods, and knowledge of home-school relationships (Abt-Perkins & Rosen, cited in Willis, 2000). Each will be discussed in more detail below.

(1) *Self-Knowledge*. Before teachers can address the literacy needs of children in their care, they must first become aware of their own cultural beliefs and practices. Self-knowledge is defined as "a thorough understanding of one's own cultural roots and group affiliations" (Haberman & Post, cited in Willis, 2000). A teacher's culture, language, social interests, goals, and values—especially when they are different from the children in the program—can create a barrier to understanding how best to support the learning of the children in her care (Orange & Horwitz, cited in Willis, 2000). By reflecting on their own cultural beliefs and practices about teaching and learning, teachers can better understand the cultural perspective they bring to the early childhood classroom.

It is also important to consider the knowledge we have acquired from our professional education. Our training gives us a cultural lens through which we interpret children's behavior and skills. This professional perspective probably includes information about what are considered "best practices" in teaching language and literacy skills and what are considered "developmentally appropriate" skills for children aged birth to 5. As we get to know various children, families, and cultures, we may find these professional standards challenged in various ways.

This process of reflection can become complicated when teachers are members of the mainstream culture. Dominant groups, whether by race or class, are often unaware of their cultural identity because their cultural beliefs comprise the mainstream standard of what is considered "normal" or "typical" (Tatum, cited in Willis, 2000). Minority cultural groups may be more aware of their identity because external images and practices often do not reflect their beliefs of their family or community. Some potential cultural differences related to language and literacy learning are outlined below. Take a few moments to reflect on your and your family's beliefs and practices in each of these areas.

- *When do you believe that children should begin to acquire language and literacy skills? Do you believe it is important to speak to children (babies) who are preverbal?*
- *What is the correct way to interact with books and other literacy materials? For example, how do you feel about babies sucking and chewing on books?*
- *Do you think parents should take on a "teaching" role when it comes to language and literacy skills?*
- *Do you prefer to read stories to children, tell stories, or sing songs? Why do you think that might be?*

When teachers become aware of their cultural backgrounds and values, they can begin to address any preconceived

notions that could make it difficult for them to accept, understand, and effectively teach children in their care (Willis, 2000).

(2) *Cultural Knowledge*. Cultural knowledge refers to the important role that culture plays in shaping children's perceptions, self-esteem, values, behavior, and learning (Willis, 2000). Research on culturally relevant teaching practices has found that knowledge of children's home cultures—most importantly their languages, literacy practices, and values—can help teachers address the interests and build on the skills of their students (Abt-Perkins and Rosen, cited in Willis, 2000). Some ways that teachers can learn about children's cultures include talking with families, viewing family photographs or videos, involving families in classroom activities, reading about families' cultures, observing interactions between children and families, and attending cultural events in the community.

When teachers make an effort to understand family cultures, they are better able to individualize the curriculum to ensure that it is meaningful and relevant to children. This, in turn, contributes to children's successful language and literacy skill acquisition.

(3) *Linguistic Knowledge*. Teachers must also understand how young children's communication styles and dialects affect their learning. Accepting children's home languages can help them transition to the more standard form of English that is an important part of literacy development; as Au notes, "with regards to . . . literacy learning, proficiency in standard American English should be seen as a goal, *not* as a prerequisite to becoming literate" (Au, cited in Willis, 2000).

How can teachers gain linguistic knowledge? By listening to children, talking with parents, and watching parents and children talk together. Teachers may observe important cultural differences in these interactions, such as (Barera in Willis, 2000):

- The forms of questions children are asked and accepted responses from children;
- The perceived uses of reading and writing;
- The styles of oral narration (story-telling);
- The patterns of interaction between adults and children (e.g., children may not be encouraged to take the lead in conversations with adults);
- Accepted roles of behavior, such as those associated with gender;
- Customary ways of responding (e.g., a value placed on eye contact while speaking, or not).

Teachers can learn more by visiting the family's community and by asking families what language and literacy skills they believe are important for their children to achieve. From these interactions and observations, teachers gain an understanding of the strengths children and families bring with them to the program. Such knowledge can help teachers support the development of literacy and

language skills, building from the child's current knowledge and interests. This practice describes a strengths-based approach, which draws from what children already know and can do; in contrast to a deficits-based approach, which focuses on the perceived gaps in children's skill sets (e.g., a lack of proficiency in standard American English). Consider which approach you have found more effective in your own learning experiences.

(4) *Culturally Informed Teaching Knowledge*. Culturally informed teaching knowledge describes the information and access to resources that allow teachers to create a learning environment that welcomes children from diverse cultures. This environment describes not only the physical set-up of the classroom, but also a culturally sensitive pattern of teacher-child interactions, and the use of teaching approaches that engage and encourage the participation of children from a variety of cultures.

Culturally informed teaching strategies help teachers individualize learning experiences based on each child's needs. Delpit notes: "The question is not necessarily how to create the perfect 'culturally matched' learning situation for each ethnic group, but rather how to recognize when there is a problem for a particular child. . . ." (Delpit, cited in Willis, 2000) After the problem and its cause are addressed, teachers can identify a specific learning approach tailored to that child.

Most importantly, teachers' expectations of and relationships with their students are profoundly important in promoting early learning. The teacher's expectations, often communicated in both verbal and nonverbal ways, influence children's behavior and academic performance: "Children mirror the teacher's expectations" (Willis, 2000). Research has established that when children feel welcomed, valued, and challenged in their learning environment, and when new learning builds upon their prior knowledge, experiences, and interests, they are more academically successful (Willis, 2000).

(5) *Knowledge of Multicultural Materials and Literacy Methods*. This knowledge base refers to the use of multicultural texts in ways that serve to reduce stereotypes, rather than perpetuate them (Abt-Perkins & Rosen, cited in Willis, 2000). One of the most powerful ways for early childhood programs to honor children's cultures is by utilizing multicultural children's literature in the curriculum. Such books stimulate discussions about human differences, diversity, and cultural beliefs and practices (both of mainstream and subordinated groups). Consider the following checklist when selecting children's books that value diversity (Derman-Sparks & A.B.C. Task Force, 2001; Jalongo, 2004; Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 1998):

- Does the book reflect a diversity of gender roles; racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds; special needs and abilities; a range of ages; a range of occupations?



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- Do the text and illustrations present current, accurate, respectful images and information?
- Is the culture portrayed multidimensionally?
- Are cultural details naturally integrated into the story?
- Does the book reflect different languages?
- Is the speech of the people in the book accurate and appropriate?
- Does the story help members of a group feel greater pride in their background?
- What is the copyright date of the book? How might that have affected the accuracy/authenticity of the story?
- Does the book encourage children to become more socially conscious?

Teaching strategies for introducing language and literacy skills must also take into account issues of culture. Teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse students soon discover that there is no one “right” way to promote early literacy learning. It is necessary, instead, to seek out flexible, responsive teaching strategies.

Strickland (1998) provides teachers and caregivers with six characteristics of relevant literacy instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Using these as a framework, teachers can create their own approaches to promoting the learning and intellectual curiosity of the children in their care. These characteristics include:

- *A child’s culture and background experiences are critical to literacy learning.* Children learn how literacy is used and how knowledge is shared *both* at home and at school. Each perspective is important.

- *What is happening in children’s homes is important to their learning.* Every home environment has strengths and challenges; teachers can look for ways to build on family strengths as a means to support children’s learning. Teachers must also avoid characterizing the home learning environments of linguistic or cultural minority children in a biased manner, as great variability exists within cultures and across communities.
- *Learning and teaching is enhanced when context is utilized to support children’s learning.* One way to view literacy is as an ever-expanding set of experiences and activities, rather than the acquisition of prerequisite skills (Teale & Sulzy, cited in Yaden & Tam, n.d.). Based on this view, emergent literacy skills are embedded in the contexts of both home and community, as well as in the more formal context of child care or preschool. When teachers are familiar with and can mobilize literate members of a child’s home and community contexts to promote the development early literacy skills, they can support children’s learning in all of their caregiving settings.
- *The use of language for real communication enhances learning.* It is critical to give children the opportunity to use meaningful oral and written language.
- *The use of culturally relevant materials and activities helps to support children’s learning.* This is a reminder to teachers to become more knowledgeable about both multicultural literature and the communication styles of the families in their programs. In short, when learning is meaningful and relevant to children’s lives, and

when it builds on children's existing knowledge, it tends to "stick."

- *A focus on high-level thinking and problem-solving is critical for all children.* Rather than focusing solely on mechanical issues, such as pronunciation at the word or letter level, teachers should also engage children in more substantive activities, such as discussing stories. This helps to avoid the boredom that reduces children's motivation for literacy learning.

Links to Family and Community

The last knowledge base needed for teaching in diverse classroom, *knowledge of home-school relationships*, explores the importance of relationships between teachers and families as a strategy for promoting children's literacy learning.

The present as we know it is linked to the past as lived and interpreted by the generations that went before us. So it is with the families we work with. Knowledge of home-school relationships can help teachers collaborate with families and engage their expertise to enhance children's literacy learning in the program.

The first step is for teachers to examine their own preconceived notions about home literacy environments. Numerous research studies refute the "notion that poor, minority and immigrant families do not value or support literacy development"; rather, these families "frequently see literacy and schooling as the key to mobility, to changing their status and preventing their children from suffering as they have" (Auerbach, cited in Willis, 2000). Just as children live up (or down) to teachers' expectations, families, too, can sense when the efforts to engage them are genuine and when they are not. When teachers reach out to families, offering them respect, and engaging them as equals, true collaboration can occur.

This collaboration has measurable effects on children's literacy development. One research study, involving largely African-American and Latino inner-city families, found that when developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive literacy activities were used in schools and homes, when parents were included and involved in the planning, when homework was assigned that required parental involvement, and when monthly meetings with parents, teachers, and children were held, the literacy achievement of [children] increased" (Morrow & Young, cited in Willis, 2000). Findings like these serve as a reminder of the importance of quality relationships at all levels of the program—between teachers and children, and between teachers and families. Early childhood teachers can use supportive, respectful relationships in a strategic way to support children's learning, in both the literacy and language domains and beyond.

Together, the five knowledge bases discussed above support teachers' efforts to create a culturally sensitive, welcoming, and respectful learning environment for children and families from all cultures. These knowledge bases encourage



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self-awareness and reflection on the teacher's part and provide support for identifying alternate and creative ways of promoting literacy learning. In reviewing each, it is important to remember that these do not represent five steps that, once taken, are completed and never revisited. Rather, they reflect an ongoing process of self-awareness, learning, and discovery that are repeated at intervals throughout a teacher's career.

The Teacher's Powerful and Professional Role

By taking a good look at our early relationships and childhood experiences, we can be more aware of the impact they have on our role as teachers and caregivers, and on our feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about children. It is important to remember that every interaction that we have with a child is a cultural exchange. How we diaper, what and how we feed an infant or toddler, the words we use to guide a young child, the topics or problems we select to discuss with families, the toys and other materials we purchase or make available for play, the way we hold a child, (and so on) are all a reflection of our cultural beliefs. By taking the time to reflect on how—as young children—we were fed, talked to, disciplined or guided, nurtured, and taught, and who was involved in our care, we can begin the process of understanding what and why we have certain beliefs and expectations about young children. This awareness is also important for helping us understand how our culture influences our practices and the relationships we have with children in our care.

Recognizing that each person has a culture that impacts all interactions with others is a first step in the process of becoming aware of our unique cultural perspective. Many erroneously believe that culture is what others coming from exotic lands process. It is fairly common for many in the United States to believe that they are "just normal Americans," and find it a challenge to consider that there may not be just one shared culture in this society. It is by being willing to explore our own beliefs, family stories, atti-

tudes, family history, and early memories that the recognition and acceptance we all have a culture begins to emerge. This process of exploration and questioning may not be simple or easy, but the benefits will be many. One benefit is that we will be clearer on what and why we adhere to certain beliefs and attitudes, and how these affect the relationships we have with the children in our care and their families.

Teachers have the potential to play a powerful and crucial role in the lives of the young children. Through positive and nurturing relationships with children and their families, teachers can have a long-term impact on both the emotional and intellectual development of the children in our programs. §

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