

EDUCATING CHILDREN IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

Focus on Culture & Language



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ECE agenda

- † After January 2009, a new day, new outlook for ECE—greater recognition of diversity, and of children's needs.
- † Today, issues for ECE educators, considering the important role we play in the lives of children, their families, and the future of our diverse society.
 - † Part 1. Culture and learning—how does culture affect learning, and whose culture matters?
 - † Part 2. Language learning in cultural context—what it takes for second language learning to be additive and not subtractive.

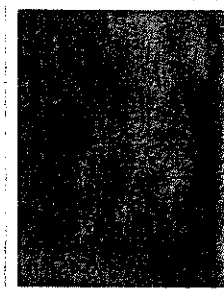


ECE in a diverse society

Some special challenges for educators to consider

Tough times for our schools

- * Over the past 8 years, our schools have changed a lot under NCLB:
- * Holding schools accountable for raising standardized test scores for all student groups;
- * Threats to shut down schools that are not meeting AYP goals;
- * Move towards privatization.





The NCLB Blame Game

Finger-pointing

“The
Educational
Establishment”



Educational
Researchers &
Theorists

Parents and
Families

How NCLB has affected ECE

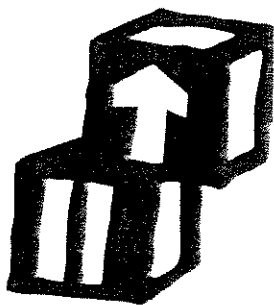
- * Huge disparities in educational outcomes for children in K-12 have caused educators to look to ECE as a solution to the problem;
- * Why? Recognition that what happens in the early years of life is critical to future educational success has led this conclusion: early remediation of the deficiencies that are preventing many children from making it in school.
- * Getting children who are regarded as being “at risk” of school failure into school at an earlier and earlier age— at birth, even, for some!

Federal ECE policies...

- * Take Head Start for example—beginning in 2004, in keeping with NCLB, there has been a mandate for early literacy and math preparation for 3 and 4 year olds, what used to be covered in kindergarten and the first grade even, in English of course.
- * How the mandate was enforced: standardized testing of 4 year old children on letters and sounds, numeracy, addition and subtraction, English lexical concepts and forms, measurement, and the ability to read graphs and charts (yes!).

Think I'm kidding?

- * Take a look at a few items from Head Start's National Reporting System instrument for assessing learning in four year olds.
- * Until June 2007, Head Start Centers were required to test all children. In the name of accountability, Head Start centers risked the loss of funding if children did not show improvements in test scores over time.



How did 4 year olds fare on such a test?
Let's see how 2 very bright ELLs (Celina & Anh)
performed...

Pretty good?

- * Actually not. Although both children were being maximally cooperative and were awesomely bright, neither had the English to interpret any of these items!
- * They tried to figure out what the task called for; they identified something on each page that they knew something about, and offered a reasonable response to a prompt they didn't understand.

Should they have done better on a test like this?

- * They are new to English. Celina's Spanish and Anh's Vietnamese were well-developed and just right for their age and experience.
- * They are four year olds:
 - Should they already know words like "awarding" and "delivering"?
 - Should 4 year olds know how to interpret bar graphs?
 - Should they already know how to read rulers as measures of length and height?

Is it any wonder that this test is no longer required?

It was scrapped in June, 2007, when Congress reauthorized Head Start. "The NRS is flawed, and can not be used for decision-making..."
But don't think that is the end of such efforts! Test-mania is alive and well.



It's not just Head Start

- * There is, throughout the country, a move toward universal preschool; 40 states now have state funded programs.
- * The emphasis on English and the push-down curriculum is driving what happens in many if not most programs!
- * The big question to ask—how appropriate are such programs for any young child irrespective of background?

What's behind all this?

- ✦ Remember that blame game—the argument that parents and family members in not preparing their children properly for school?
- ✦ The feds (i.e., the present administration's Department of Education and NICHD's bureaucrats) and many state-level policy-makers have identified the problem as being deficiencies in the children themselves, and in inadequacies in the parents of such children, and in their ability to give them what they need (e.g., language & skills).
- ✦ A major trend in inservice education in far too many school districts these days: studying "the culture of poverty"—the view that it is hopeless to try to change family circumstances.

What's wrong with that?

- * Does poverty really *explain* poor school performance?
- * A very different conclusion is reached when we look at disparities in educational programs provided the children of affluent families versus ones provided for the children of poor families—especially from minority backgrounds.
- * Most of all, we find in too many of the latter type of programs, the mindset that children from at-risk groups (sight unseen) are going to have difficulty learning, and will therefore be difficult to teach. That's the argument for remedial programs for young children!

Separate tracks...

- * Developmentally appropriate practices are still followed in ECE programs for the children of more affluent families;
- * A look at preschool programs for poor and minority group kids (funded by the feds especially) will show that while teachers try to do what's right and needed by children, they must capitulate for the most part to the demands for phonics training, math skills, and until recently, test preparation.

Is that what they need?

- * Young children—irrespective of their background—need to discover that they are capable of learning, that learning is possible, is something they can do with some effort on their part, and a little help from others.
- * They get that only when opportunities to learn and learning experiences available to them are meaningful, are developmentally and linguistically appropriate, and the children are ready for them.

What do children need?

- ✦ Time to learn what all children must learn well in the early years—foundational skills for learning, how to work cooperatively with others; how to participate in instructional activities in a school setting; new ways of learning, solving problems, and dealing with experiences;
- ✦ Their primary language, and—OK—a second language too, as long as it is not at the cost of their primary language;
- ✦ Experiences that help them discover that books can be the source of information, aesthetic experiences, and knowledge.

Some crucial questions...

- † What enables children to thrive educationally, and to become enthusiastic and successful learners for life?
- † What's behind the disparities we find in educational outcomes in school: unequal opportunities in schooling? unequal preparation for school? language and cultural differences?
- † Are developmentally appropriate practices less important for educating some young children than for others?

Diversity & variability

- * As educators of young children, we recognize the considerable variability that exist across children in what they are ready to do and what they need at any given point in time;
- * As educators in a diverse society, we also recognize that there are considerable differences in what families believe they should be preparing their children to do.

The question of readiness

- * What is readiness? Many educators assume that there is agreement as to what readiness is needed, and what it means;
- * Contrary to popular belief, it is a culturally defined construct; notions of readiness have in fact changed over the years.
- * It is based on what schools believe children should be ready to do—and that, as we have seen is not a fixed idea!

What we know...

- * Children's development and readiness to learn must be considered not just in terms of what's expected of them in school, but also in relation to the social worlds their families and communities expect them to grow into and to survive in as they mature.
- * Expectations must be culturally, socially and age appropriate.

Ecological view of readiness

Consideration of all aspects of children's development in context: their families, their communities, influences on their social, emotional, spiritual, cultural, intellectual, and linguistic development.



Vygotsky:

"Children grow into the social worlds we create for them."

And into worlds of the mind...

It's essential that families participate in making learning, questioning, exploring the world of ideas and learning from people, experiences, and yes, books too, as crucial aspects of family life.



Foundations for learning

- ✦ Begin in the home, and depend on the nurturing relationships between family members and children;
- ✦ It includes learning how to relate to others, how to learn from experiences, how to experience the world;
- ✦ An essential part of building that foundation is in acquiring the means to communicate with family members and people in the primary community.

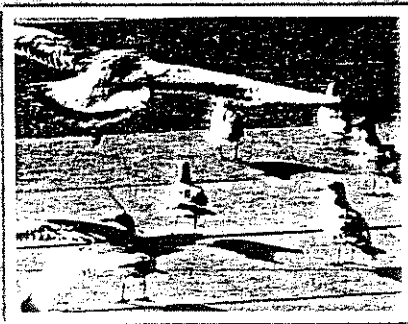
The socialization of children

- * A key function of the family – teaching children what they need to know, feel, believe, and behave to become well integrated into the life of the family and primary community;
- * This includes learning culturally approved ways of dealing with new experiences, and learning from them;
- * Learning is guided by culture.



What is culture anyway?

- * This is a concept we talk about a lot, but what does it really mean?
- * Hard to define, harder to detect, and easy to misunderstand!
- * Its most crucial aspects are the ones that are the least obvious—at least to cultural insiders!



Let's take a look at culture & learning

Ways in which culture affects learning...

- † The ways we think about and approach learning are framed by our cultural experiences and cultures—for example,
- † How we think learning happens, and what role the learner rather than parents, teachers and circumstances play in making it happen;
- † The conditions under which learning can happen—how much does structure, freedom, choice, observation, exploration or necessity figure in making it happen?
- † Beliefs about the desirability of praise and evidence of approval in teaching and learning.

Beliefs about learning...

- * Who can learn (whatever) and who can't? (Gender, age, circumstances, perceived individual capacity)
- * Who should decide when a person is ready to learn (whatever), and what governs readiness to learn?
- * What facilitates learning, and how should learners respond when learning doesn't come easily, or when there are barriers to learning?
- * What can be expected of children at various ages (this affects our age-norms for initiative, independence, and "mature behavior").

Beliefs about education

- What's the purpose of an education?
- What constitutes an education worth having —"education" versus "Education".
- What's worth learning, and what is not? Why learn or not learn something?
- Who deserves to succeed educationally, and why?
- What are the rewards for being educated?

As educators...

- * We need to recognize the role culture plays in learning, not only in terms of how it might affect children's learning at school, but also in our expectations of how they should behave there, and in recognizing the role we must play in making learning possible for all children!
- * We need to assume that children are guided by rational principles, and seek to understand them!

Socialization for learning

- * In the early years of life, family members—guided by cultural practice and beliefs about children and learning—prepare children to acquire the beliefs, values, and practices that enable them to function smoothly and successfully in the world of the family and primary community.
- * Family members are guided by implicit expectations and standards of behavior for children at various stages of development, these being culturally specific rather than universal.

Family integrity

- * The process is designed to preserve the integrity of the family, and to insure that its members are able to participate in achieving the family's larger goals;
- * What children are expected to learn in the early years is essential to their participation as family members.



Socialization practices

- * The content and form of the process by which children are socialized for learning are guided by tradition, but that does not mean that these are immutable.
- * Practices and patterns can change as families find themselves in situations where they believe change is desirable or necessary.
- * There are, however, for most people, some aspects of the process that they would regard as sacrosanct: too important to be changed or moderated even.

Who decides what can or should be modified?



- * These are decisions that can only be made by families—there are many pressures on parents to change their ways;
- * Some changes are likely to be detrimental to the family—e.g., communicating with the children only in English even though the parents are not fluent in that language.

Some changes are necessary; for example, the society requires...

- * Schooling irrespective of gender and birth order;
- * Schooling as children's chief occupation until age 16-18;
- * Standards for behavior and comportment established by school/society;
- * All children must learn and use English for life outside of the home.



How to achieve this? Partnerships between parents and teachers

Culture in the classroom

- * As teachers in a diverse society, serving children from diverse backgrounds, it is unavoidable that culture will play a major role in shaping our practices in the classroom!
- * Three sources of cultural influence that can affect teaching & learning at school: children's home cultures, "school culture," and the teacher's own culture!

What about your culture?

- * As educators (teachers, program directors, teaching assistants, or parents!), it is important to know what has influenced the ways you think about teaching and learning!
- * Many influences: your education as a teacher, what you have read, your observations of children, and most importantly, your own experiences as a learner, beginning in early childhood!

What's needed...

- * Adjustment & effort on both sides:
- * From educators at school: recognition of what children bring to school; efforts to build on their strengths;
- * From educators at home: recognition that they play a big role in preparing children to learn from books at school, and later on, in supporting their efforts in learning.

Part 2 Language Learning & Learning An ecological perspective

What this part is about

Language development—its importance not only for the social adjustment of children, but for their educational development too;

How children develop the language needed for learning at school;

The roles of educators, both at home and at school, in helping children develop the language skills they need.

Key points, here

The bigger picture—beyond the nitty-gritty of preparing children with "basic skills" for literacy and academic learning;

Crucial questions—what enables children to thrive educationally, and to become enthusiastic readers and learners?

Consideration of language as socialization for learning.

Big changes in expectations

Under "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), there are big changes in what schools expect of young children coming into the system;

Children are expected to arrive at school ready to read, write, and handle math, or they will indeed be left behind!



Preparation for literacy

There is a lot of talk about readiness for literacy and learning, much of it focused on language skills;

The expectation is that children will have the English language skills the school wants them to have, based on a mainstream model—clarity of expression, breadth of vocabulary, ability to use complex grammatical structures, knowledge of turn-taking conventions in conversations, ability to include appropriate details in sharing personal narratives.

Preparation for literacy

The expectation these days is that all five year olds will be ready for literacy:

They know that sentences are made up of words, that words can be broken down into sounds, and these sounds can be represented by symbols—in English, of course.

This is the standard against which all children are judged these days.



Well and five but

What does that mean for children who have been reared in a different language, and according to a different model of language socialization?

Will the language resources that children bring to school from other language and cultural backgrounds be recognized by their teachers?

What often happens—children are “diagnosed” as being language delayed, language impaired, as having language disabilities, because educators at school are unable to look past differences!

Socialization into a culture

Language is learned, not separately, but as a part of a larger cultural package—children acquire the means to communicate with the important others in their primary community in culturally appropriate ways.

The language is much more than just a means of communication: it tells the world who we are, what we are like, where we come from, and suggests where we are going in life.

That involves getting one's act together—learning when to talk, what to say, who we can talk to and in what way, and under what conditions.

Children are engaged in important work—preparing for life.

An Alaskan example

Yup'it kids—speakers of "Bush English," who live in remote villages along the Yukon River.

Judged by the schools to be "alingual"—no real language, and yet, argumentative!

Subsistence economy—hunting & fishing—always with a partner, usually a buddy for life;

The necessity of cooperation and knowing your partner well.



Stephen & Cody - June 1997

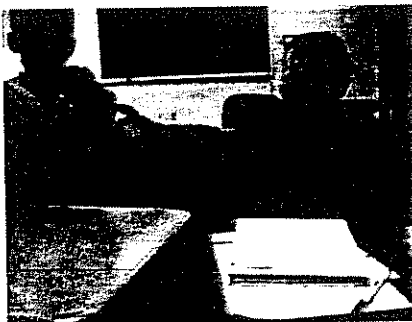


Best buddies—they are distantly related;

How I came to interview them—study of the language resources of kids along the Yukon River invited by the regional school district.

What they were like—Stephen, a gritty-eyed realist; Cody a kind-hearted romantic. Their big task: learning to think as one!

NB: An adult walrus can weigh 2 tons; yearlings weigh ca. 400 lbs.



Cody: We were at coast, we seen a walrus. an den i go pooh-poo, here's the thing, an den i go, pooh-look-poooh-i go like pooh-poooh..I like the boat...
 Steph: An nen i never fly away...
 Cody: Jus' see and you, and nobody save me. I was hold onto a rock, right?
 Steph: Yep, and it saved you, an nen, an' am...
 Cody: An nen my friend Walrus save me, right?

What I Learned From Them

Far from being alingual, these kids were as bright and verbal—and knowledgeable as any children I have ever met anywhere in the world;

Huge, rich vocabularies about the critters—anything alive on land, sea, and in the air—their internal organ systems, plants, how weather conditions affect life in their environment, and about weapons and hunting.

They learned from their parents, from relatives and from the people in their community, and most of all, from their experiences.

They liked school (it was the only place to hang out in the village), but they did not see much relevance in what was taught there.

To them, teachers and books existed in a parallel but quite separate universe.

Biological perspective

Young children need some of the skills and preparation for literacy the school expects them to have, but they also have to survive socially and linguistically in the world of the home and primary community;

Must they give up the means of survival in the world of the home and community to succeed in school?

The question—how do we make sure they are prepared for school, but not at the expense of the linguistic and social skills they need for life in their homes and communities?

What can educators do to insure that the transition between the worlds of the home and school be smooth and positive?

Language socialization

Rich or poor, children learn the language(s) spoken in their homes;

Children come to school at age 5 with language that reflects the communicative practices in their homes and community;

How well that language supports literacy depends on what happens after they get to school—that kind of language is learned at school through literacy experiences there.

Language differences

In a diverse society like ours, many languages are spoken in homes and communities—some are varieties of English, others are indigenous languages, many are immigrant languages;

This becomes a problem when only one language and in fact, only one version of that language is valued as a foundation for literacy and educational development.

What happens in a state like California, whose voters have decided that the only language that can be used in school is English?

Working with differences

How language differences are treated can greatly affect school adjustment and later social adjustment.

Children are highly sensitive to people's attitudes towards them;

Language is a crucial part of identity—it is fundamental to how anyone relates to others;

Children know when people regard them or the way they speak as inadequate—and in such situations, they are unlikely to flourish or to be enthusiastic about learning.

What do children need?

There is substantial evidence that having good, strong, language skills is essential to school success.

The better their language skills are when they start school, the easier it will be for them to learn what they must in school—including a second language.

Ideally, the language used in ECE programs is the one used in children's homes, and the cultural values and practices are consistent with the family's.

Then there is no conflict between what is learned at school in the early years, and what is learned at home.

Must realistically?

A different language is used at school than at home, and the cultural practices & values are not congruent with those of the children's families;

In such cases, the parents will have to work harder to achieve a balance between home and school.

What it will take to accomplish that is a partnership between school and home, a point I will return to repeatedly.

What about English?

English is necessary and very important, but it is also essential that children learn the language of the home and family—ideally before they embark on the learning of a higher status second language.

What can and does happen—all too often—children put aside and lose the language of home and family as soon as they learn enough English to get by. Does that matter?

A strong and well developed first language provides a solid foundation for the learning of a second language, for social development, and for learning all that children must learn in school.

The importance of children's first language

First languages are the foundation for everything important in children's lives: family intimacy, cultural identity, cognitive development, and communication with the most important others in their lives;

What can happen when children learn a higher status language before the first language is well established: shift of language loyalty and language loss.

When that happens: parents will find it hard to communicate with their children and to teach them what parents must teach their children at home.

The old math of second language learning:

$L1 + L2 = \text{Bilingualism}$

The New Math

$1 + 1 = 1!$

I am not saying we should avoid teaching young children English as an L2 in the preschool years.

That may be unavoidable. We must work with parents to prevent English from overwhelming the primary language as children acquire English as a second language.

Parents must, with the help & encouragement of ECE teachers, find ways to balance the influence of the two languages, and to maintain linguistic equilibrium at home.



Balance of partnership

The home language can't always be supported in school: in states like CA especially, it isn't easy to do so;

The development of the primary language has to take place in the home and parents and family members will have to be responsible for seeing that it is done;

It isn't easy for family members to do what is necessary without support from educators, however—(there is a lot of wrong-headed thinking about language learning everywhere).

The problem many parents face

The strong urge to switch from the L1 to English—with the resultant loss of the L1;

Parents are told (and they may even believe) that they are handicapping their children by interacting with them solely in the family language—so they speak English, even when they don't know English well.

Children do not want to be different. They come to believe that the family language is a social barrier.

Languages other than English do not thrive in the U.S. because of socio-political forces operating on people.

For immigrant families, this tendency is disruptive and painful.

How does language develop?

Not on its own—children need people to interact with them whether in a first or second language at age appropriate levels; they need to be engaged in talk; they need to be listened to, and responded to!

The forms of talk that are the most productive are ones that promote participation in learning activities that are inherently interesting, while learning meaningful materials and skills.

Academic language

Although the children we are talking about are young, early exposure to academic language is crucial;

The foundation for academic language development is laid in the early years of life—ideally at home as well as in preschool;

Children who are exposed to the language of storybooks, of oral narratives, and of learning activities in preschool are given a jump-start in dealing with such language later in school.

Our role in language development

To the children you serve, you are teacher, caretaker, surrogate parent, and most importantly, the source of language development!

While they are with you in the preschool, you are the center of their social world.

Big question: what's your role in helping children develop the language skills they need for school?

How teachers can make every activity an opportunity for language learning and development.

What makes a difference?

Let's consider talking with children who do not know the language you speak—what's crucial: interaction.

While you are with them—interacting with them whether or not they understand or can respond to you—speaking, listening to them, responding, drawing out, expanding and so on.

It's not how much you talk, but what you say that matters. Question: what language is needed?

THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF TALK

We can distinguish between purely social or phatic communication and what Jim Cummins has described as cognitive and academic talk;

This second kind of talk is learned through communication about ideas, and functions as an instrument of thought and learning.

A way to develop such talk is by talking with children about the activities they are engaged in—most importantly, focusing on ideas, explanations, relationships, and concepts.

ELABORATING CONVERSATION

Encouraging children to talk about their experiences and elaborating on their comments;

Engaging children in activities that invite and promote talk;

Inviting children to comment on pictures in storybooks, on stories, and to retell them (to the extent that they can, given their age).

Encouraging dramatic play—conversations with other children around props, costumes, and other play materials.

ELABORATING CONVERSATION

A collaboration between an Arabic speaking mother, Arwa, and Master Teacher, Karen Wiggins-Dowler at the Mary Meta Lazarus Child Development Center at the College of San Mateo.

A two week activity in which the class engaged in a major learning activity with pre-literacy activities, art, "cooking," dramatic play, and Arabic language!

The class is multilingual and multicultural, and you will see how Teacher Maggie May Lam supports a child during the activity in her L1, Cantonese.

The day Soodie Ansari & I went to videotape the activities, the kids were playing restaurant, serving up Middle Eastern delicacies—hummus, baba gnanoush, and addas!



Modeling talk for children

Talking while you interact—explaining, asking questions, describing, calling attention, evaluating, hypothesizing, etc.

Modeling by revoicing and expanding what children say (there were several examples of that in the CSM-CDC restaurant activity)—the children may or may not get it right away; it doesn't matter;

Providing useful, kindly given, helpful corrective feedback, by modeling what children are trying to say in a more complete utterance.

The importance of vocabulary development

A well-established relationship between vocabulary development and future literacy development—children with well developed vocabularies learn to read faster, and to progress further in academic development than children who start out with poorly developed vocabularies;

According to experts on vocabulary development,* advantaged 17 year olds know ca. 80,000 words; to do that, they have to learn from 13-14 words per day from the time they are a year old!

*(George Miller & Patricia Gildea: "How children learn words:" 1987)

Expanding vocabulary

Calling attention not just to words, but to their meanings and use as well—this is analogous to the difference between teaching children to count, and teaching children to count objects;

Modeling precise or alternative ways to express what the child is trying to say;

Essential to development: listening and responding to what children have to say, encouraging more precise reference and characterizations!

Working with parents

Encouraging parents to talk with their children at home;

Doing workshops for parents where they discuss ways to expand children's linguistic resources at home, and away from home (how to make the most out of outings);

Helping parents see why it is essential for them to work on language development at home, especially when the language is not English.



Encourage parents to read to their children in the home



A great way to support the continued development of the LI is to encourage parents to narrate stories around picture books, to read to children (if they can), or tell stories in the home language:

Stories which deal with culturally familiar topics and which are culturally relevant are ideal.

Most importantly...

Helping parents see that their task is to do the best, most complete job possible of socializing their children to be the kind of people they want them to be as adults;

That means they need the values, beliefs, cultural knowledge & communicative skills required for life in the larger society, and in their own community as well.

They must also prepare their children from school, and that may mean some small changes in how they socialize their children, but these changes should not require them to change their core values or ways of relating to their children.

Helping parents see that it will be up to them to promote and develop the family language.

It takes partnerships between parents and early educators, between home and school, to ensure that children have the language skills needed for learning...