

Teaching Young Children From Immigrant and Diverse Families

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E DUCATING CHILDREN FROM IMMIGRANT FAMILIES is one of the central concerns of today's early childhood teachers in the United States (Stires & Genishi 2008). The 2010 US Census data show that 25 percent of the nation's children are immigrants or come from immigrant families (Yen 2011). Children who are immigrants (including children who may have been born in the United States but whose parents were not) are now the fastest-growing segment of the nation's youth (Stires & Genishi 2008; FIFCFS 2011; Yen 2011), and the fastest-growing group of such children is comprised of Latino/a emergent bilinguals (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2007; García & Kleifgen 2010). According to Lopez and Taylor (2010), in 2008 Latino/as were "the nation's largest minority ethnic group" (1), numbering 46.9 million—or 15.4 percent of the total US population. Yet over 75 percent of early childhood teachers are White and monolingual speakers of mainstream American English (IES 2008; Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani 2010). Some of these teachers may not fully understand how to build on the strengths of children whose cultural and linguistic practices are (to varying degrees) different from their own. For example, the children they teach have culturally specific interactional styles and may speak Spanish as their home language (Valdés 1996; Zentella 2005; Souto-Manning 2010a). Yet differences are often conceptualized as deficits.

Many teachers teach the way they were taught (Goodwin & Genor 2008). By doing so, they might not use the most promising and culturally relevant practices for teaching children who have culturally and linguistically different backgrounds from their own (Valdés 1996; Zentella 2005; Goodwin & Genor 2008; García & García 2012). This is an important issue as "research indicates that teachers believe they have not been adequately

prepared to teach children from cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their own and that they need to learn more specific skills to do so" (Daniel & Friedman 2005, 2).

Paradigms shaping the early education of children who are immigrants

Historically, three paradigms have shaped the early education of immigrant children:

- Inferiority
- Cultural deprivation
- Cultural difference (Carter & Goodwin 1994; Valdés 1996; Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi 2008)

While their onset and prominent periods vary, each paradigm exists today and continues to influence the education of young immigrant children (Valdés 1996; Goodwin, Cheruvu & Genishi 2008). In this article, I briefly discuss these paradigms, how they affect the education of immigrant children, and ways to improve young children's educational experiences.

Inferiority and cultural deprivation: Deficits-based paradigms

The inferiority and cultural deprivation paradigms are both based on deficits attributed to children who are immigrants (Valdés 1996; Goodwin, Cheruvu & Genishi 2008); thus I explore them in combination. The inferiority paradigm assumes biological or genetic inferiority of immigrant groups (Bloch 1987; Valdés 1996; Nourrot 2004). According to Goodwin, Cheruvu, and Genishi (2008), "at the end of the 19th century, during the first 'great' immigration wave, schools aimed to civilize the newly arrived poor and culturally 'different' by providing moral guidance and character development to their children in order to combat the poverty and crime associated with ... immigration" (4).

Exploring Funds of Knowledge

O ne approach whereby teachers can respectfully and authentically learn from families is exploring families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 1992). Funds of knowledge are comprised of historically developed information, expertise, traditions, and practices that families and community members share. Teachers can incorporate funds of knowledge in their planning and programming as they invite all families to share experiences, practices, and skills that encourage learning (Nieto & Rolón 1997).

For example, Janice Baines is a first grade teacher in Columbia, South Carolina. All of the students at the primary school where she teaches are African American. While there are rich histories, legacies, and cultural practices in the community, most of the media portrayals of the community are from a deficit perspective, highlighting

crimes, gang activity, poverty, and unemployment. When she found out about the popularity of the song "Pretty Boy Swag," Ms. Baines took advantage of the children's knowledge of the song and wrote new lyrics, creating a new song: "I Can Read Swag." She used the Dolch list of sight words (Long 2011), thus linking unfamiliar words to a familiar melody and drawing on rap music as an essential part of living and learning in the community. The children sang this new song nonstop—at home, in the classroom, and on the playground (Souto-Manning 2013). In addition, Ms. Baines highlighted the typical practices that occur in community hubs such as the barbershop and connected them to academic areas (e.g., linking mathematics to making change, pricing services, and paying bills).

and how she can come to see the strengths children bring to the classroom—strengths that at first she did not understand and acknowledge.

Value children's knowledge and experience

In *Telling a Different Story: Teaching and Literacy in an Urban Preschool* (2000), Catherine Wilson records her observations of the teaching practices of a Head Start teacher (Sara) and teaching assistant (Jorene). Wilson also documents the ways the teachers honor children's backgrounds in the classroom, challenging and refusing to accept the premise that the children she teaches begin school with a "culture of poverty" (19). Sara and Jorene value children's knowledge and experiences by using stories as a framework for the curriculum of the Head Start center. They establish a curriculum "not simply as a pathway for reading and writing but as a salient means for representing experience. ... Dismissing the belief that the children arrived without the literacy experiences of middle class children ... Sara used narratives as powerful engines of the curriculum" (23–24). Sara and Jorene use books that relate to children's experiences, thus putting children's interests and cultural practices at the center of the curriculum. Throughout Wilson's book, "when Sara and Jorene speak about story reading, they envisioned teaching not only as attending to the developmental considerations of the child but also as thinking deeply about the kinds of people and society that might emerge from the educational experiences in their classroom" (37).

Strengthen children's cultural identity

In Hawaii's native communities, more than 75 percent of teachers are neither Native Hawaiian nor residents of those communities (Sarsona et al. 2008). Education is typically provided by nonnatives who immerse native Hawaiian children in practices not common or desirable in the children's homes. The Keiki Steps program—which grew from the initiative of Michelle Mahuka, a mother of two young children—was created to engage in developmentally appropriate early education that reflected the children's culture. In this program, a pluralistic path shapes the curriculum in which the child, her cultural identity, and the mainstream content and processes are considered equally. Sarsona and colleagues (2008) explained:

While we acknowledge the place for such experiences in preparing young children to succeed in school, we believe that assimilationist views need to be balanced by pluralistic views based upon assumptions of difference rather than deficit. In this light, we argue for the potential of early childhood education to strengthen the cultural identity of young children of diverse backgrounds ... as a means not only to ensure school success but to build vibrant communities and perpetuate the heritage culture and language. (155)

The Keiki Steps program was built on the premise that

when we speak of diversity in early childhood education, we must remember the importance of al-

lowing families of diverse backgrounds ... to exercise their right to choose. These families need and deserve options for early childhood education and care that support their self-determination and beliefs about how deeply held cultural values may be passed on to future generations. (164)

Embrace conflicts and learning opportunities

Mary Cowhey's *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades* (2006) is yet another example of culturally responsive teaching. Cowhey is an early childhood teacher in a public school in Massachusetts. In her book, she embodies cultural differences as a pedagogical reality, embracing conflicts.

One day, black ants appear in the second grade classroom at snack time. Some children start stomping on the ants. But 7-year-old Som Jet challenges their impulses and says in a loud voice, "No! Do not kill them! They are living things!" (2). Taking up Som Jet's invitation, Ms. Cowhey and the children learn to think about the situation from Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist perspectives, and consider that ants should have the right to live. Together, they discuss multiple perspectives about what to do with the ants.

Cowhey embraces conflicts as opportunities for learning and fostering cross-cultural understanding in a multicultural world.

Instead of relegating such a seemingly small disagreement to the confines of the classroom, Cowhey embraces conflicts such as this as opportunities for learning and fostering cross-cultural understanding in a multicultural world. In addition, she seeks to teach children to be critically conscious citizens who become active learners and "history detectives." She draws on the interests and conflicts that children experience while simultaneously addressing numerous learning standards (and beyond) through meaningful, authentic, and culturally relevant multicultural practices.

Teach from a cultural difference paradigm

Multicultural Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom (Souto-Manning 2013) highlights the work of seven early childhood teachers whose teaching practices are culturally relevant. The book presents an array of approaches, strategies, and tools for culturally relevant teaching in the early years. The teachers and classrooms featured provide young children with rich educational experiences that empower them to understand themselves in relation to others. Through the use of interviews, inquiry, culture circles, multicultural literature, storytelling and story acting, technology, and home literacies and community resources, these teachers illustrate many possibilities for teaching from a cultural difference paradigm.

Teachers as cultural beings

Engaging in culturally relevant ways of teaching immigrant and diverse children requires teachers to examine their own cultural experiences, beliefs, and values (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2011; Souto-Manning 2013), and to acknowledge the ways that their experiences shape their teaching. This is key, as teachers tend to regard their own schooling as an acultural norm, as “just the way it is.” They may thus teach the way they were taught—ethnocentrically—regarding their own schooling experience as the desirable way of teaching and learning, against which all others must be scaled and rated (Goodwin & Genor 2008; Souto-Manning 2010b), without regard for the cultural nature of teaching and learning.

Culturally responsive teachers start by acknowledging the cultural knowledge and practices that shape their approaches to teaching all children, including those from immigrant families.

Given that early childhood teachers in the United States are predominantly White, middle class, and monolingual (Zumwalt & Craig 2005; Aud, Fox, & KewaRamani 2010), and may have limited experience with diverse populations, many may see diversities in negative terms, such as believing in dangerous stereotypes—for example, that homeless people are lazy, that African American English is wrong or broken English, or that speaking languages other than English will disadvantage children academically (Goodwin & Genor 2008; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2011). These views are at least partly due to the fact that teacher education and developmental psychology have not historically positioned culture as a central aspect of early childhood teacher preparation or child development (Ryan & Grieshaber 2005). Knowledge, practices, interactions, and individuals are not culture-free (Grant & Sleeter 1996; Goodwin & Genor 2008; Souto-Manning 2013), yet they tend to be seen as such in many early childhood education settings (New & Mallory 1994; Goodwin, Cheruvu & Genishi 2008).

While it is important for teachers to learn about children’s experiences and cultural practices, before doing so it is imperative that they first analyze their own diversities, coming to see themselves as cultural beings (Nieto 1999; Goodwin & Genor 2008; Souto-Manning 2013). Culturally responsive teachers, such as those featured earlier, start by acknowledging the cultural knowledge and practices that shape their approaches to teaching all children, including those from immigrant families. This is not an easy task, nor is it a practice that can be fully described in this article. Yet teachers need to ask themselves, “Who am I as a cultural being?”

If a teacher believes that she has grown up in a cultural vacuum and has no culture, it is perhaps an indication of the privileges associated with her cultural background and practices (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 2011). Some examples of privileged categories (which are often perceived by many as normal) include White, English speaker, high income, male, American born, and heterosexual (Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning 2010).

Seeing themselves as cultural beings is essential for all educators, so they can recognize that the many cultural resources children bring from their homes and communities are worthy and not merely stepping stones that children can leave behind once they master the knowledge and practices they learn in school (Souto-Manning 2010b, 2013). Moving outside their cultural comfort zone is necessary in order for educators “to view children, their families, and members of their communities as our most important teachers” (Long et al. 2008, 253) and to more fully understand the experiences of children from immigrant families. For example, home and community visits are a valuable way for teachers to learn about children’s families and communities and the cultural practices shaping children’s development and learning. Teachers can document family and community interactions and cultural practices, and value them by bringing them into the classroom as curricula and strategies—for example, when Mary Cowhey and the second-graders engaged in critical inquiry. Critical inquiry encourages teachers, children, and family members to collaboratively learn about their communities and involves teachers and children who engage in “grand conversations” (Eeds & Wells 1989, 1) and in both wondering and information-seeking forms of dialogue (Lindfors 1999).

From the students’ interests, inquiry expands and grows to address and approach a variety of content areas. Inquiry brings together content areas in interdisciplinary and authentic ways through students’ questions and interests. It brings together a variety of backgrounds and resources—some of which are typically included in the traditional classroom, and others that are not. Inquiry is a space where the personal and academic converge and craft an interdisciplinary and culturally relevant curriculum. (Souto-Manning 2013, 42)

In critical inquiry, learners collectively uncover the social and cultural nature of knowledge. Critical inquiry can come to life as equity pedagogy, which encompasses culturally relevant practices, and thus restructure the classroom environment.

In their critical inquiry project about clothing (Souto-Manning 2013), Mary Cowhey and the children learned where clothing comes from, the history of their town’s garment manufacturing industry, and how the town’s jobs ended up overseas. Parents and other family members came in as experts and worked with the children to make patterns and sew vests. They shared personal experiences (such as working in a clothing factory in Thailand). These contributions enriched the

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