

Diverse Children, Uniform Standards

Using Early Learning and Development Standards in Multicultural Classrooms

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Additional Examples of Cultural Differences in Learning

Empirical research has advanced our understandings of how diverse cultural heritages influence *what* and *how* children learn. For example, many children in cultures indigenous to the Americas, particularly those with less exposure to schooling in the United States, are accustomed to learning through observation. In these cultures, children develop the ability to sustain keen attention to the activities of others, even as they sit and watch from outside of those activities. This is called “third-party attention” (López et al. 2010). They may be skilled at paying attention to more than one activity at the same time as they learn and then communicating nonverbally with their peers to collaborate (Mejía-Arauz et al. 2007). While it might appear that they are merely watching others, children with this cultural heritage may be particularly skilled at using observation to gain new skills and knowledge.

In contrast, children from European American and Asian backgrounds may be more accustomed to paying close attention to instructions from the teacher and then working on their own to demonstrate new skills or knowledge (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song 2013; Shneidman et al. 2016). Anglo-American children may also be more likely to interrupt others’ activities to seek help with a task, while children from North American indigenous families may be accustomed to avoiding interruptions in favor of silent observation,

and children from Asian families may tend to wait patiently for adult assistance (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song 2013; Ruvalcaba et al. 2015).

Cultural differences also extend to the ways that children initiate learning activities. Children raised with an European American heritage may be likely to initiate activities that reflect their own interests, while children who have been guided by Asian cultural traditions may be more likely to defer to the leadership of adults (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song 2013; Ng et al. 2012). In another cultural approach, children from North American indigenous communities may show initiative by volunteering to help with activities, such as chores, that are done together for the benefit of the group. This pattern undermines long-standing beliefs that children from cultures emphasizing communal endeavors are not expected to act upon their own initiative (Alcalá et al. 2014).

Such findings show that culture is more complex than a simple binary divide between “individualist” vs. “interdependent” cultures (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier 2002; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2008; Trommsdorff 2011). Although a dichotomous view of culture can be valuable in general terms, both orientations coexist in most, if not all, communities. For example, while children might demonstrate initiative in different ways, the value placed on “personal autonomy” or “agency,” defined as the freedom to “do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values [a person] regards as important,” transcends cultural communities (Sen 1985, 203). Working with a sample of four ethnic groups in the

United States (Chinese American, African American, Mexican American, and European American), one study found that parents in all groups rated “agency and self-direction” as the most important goals for their children, above alternatives such as “benevolence and prosocial,” “tradition and conformity,” and “relatedness” (Suizzo 2007). The notion that personal autonomy is found only within individualistic cultures is no longer supported by the literature.

Together, these findings challenge educators to rethink assumptions about the meaning of children’s learning behaviors during classroom activities. For example, teachers could be mistaken if they assume that children who are paying attention to their peers’ activities are therefore not attending to their own work. These children may feel that quiet and keen observation is a familiar—and highly effective—learning strategy. Similarly, children who patiently defer to adult leadership may be no less eager to satisfy their curiosity and explore their own ideas than their more vocal peers.

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