Capitalizing on Culture

Engaging Young Learners in Diverse Classrooms

Tyrone C. Howard

Diversity remains a heartbeat of the US way of life. Perhaps no place reflects the manner in which racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity are manifested better than the nation's public schools (Banks 2015). To grasp the unprecedented demographic transformation that the nation is currently experiencing, consider that as of the fall of 2014, for the first time in the nation's history, there was a higher number of non-White students enrolling in US schools than White students (US ED NCES 2017). This important shift had been predicted by demographers for some time; still, it represented a milestone in racial and cultural dynamics in the

country's schools and was a watershed moment in the changing makeup of the nation that will continue over time. The demographic transformation comes as the nation's public schools have enrolled surging numbers of Latino/a and Asian American children in recent years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Latino/a children accounted for 25 percent of US public elementary and secondary students in the fall of 2014 and are projected to make up close to 30 percent of students by the fall of 2026 (2017). Hence, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity is a staple of our nation's schools—and it is a strength as we try to live up to our core democratic ideals.

As diversity increases in the nation's schools, the prevalence of student punishment and discipline is an area that concerns many. What has become increasingly apparent is that the greater the ethnic and racial diversity in schools, the higher the rates of disciplinary action (Skiba et al. 2015). Disproportionate expulsions and suspensions of African American and Latino/a children in particular, along with their placement in special education classes, remain normative practices in many school districts, even among the youngest of learners (Artiles et al. 2010; Harry & Klingner 2014; Gilliam et al. 2016). A number of scholars have raised the possibility that cultural misunderstandings, racial discrimination, and implicit bias may all contribute to this problem, all of which seem to have gotten worse since the beginning of the 21st century (Howard 2010).

A report released by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in 2014 revealed distinct differences in school discipline for students across racial and cultural lines. The OCR data indicate that the discipline disparities start early and continue throughout the school experiences of racially diverse students. African Americans make up 18 percent of all preschool age children, yet they comprised almost 50 percent of all preschool age children who received out-of-school suspensions in 2012 (US ED OCR 2014). One can only question what the offenses could be that can lead to the suspension of 4- and 5-year-old children, but for Black children this is happening frequently across the nation.

To underscore disproportionality in discipline measures among young learners, recent research examining suspension of preschoolers discovered that many preschool teachers and staff administer discipline in ways that often disadvantage Black students (Gilliam et al. 2016). The teachers' races play a big role in disciplinary actions, with White teachers disciplining Black children with greater frequency than Black teachers. This research also suggests that White educators may be acting on stereotypes, such as that Black preschoolers are more likely to misbehave, effectively judging Black and White children against different standards. While more research is needed, it appears that many early childhood educators expect worse behavior from, and have lower learning expectations for, Black children than for other children.

Given the increasing racial and cultural diversity in the nation's schools, and in early childhood programs in particular, what role should cultural relevance have in teaching practices and policy? What are the essential knowledge and skills that early childhood educators need for teaching today's diverse learners? And how are the learning prospects compromised for diverse learners when educators do not understand them culturally? It is vital for early childhood educators to develop cultural awareness and essential proficiencies to effectively teach across racial and cultural differences. Understanding the cultural capital of young learners moves practitioners away from believing there are deficits and pathologies among communities, students, and families of color (Bloom, Davis, & Hess 1965; Moynihan 1965) and toward seeing children's behaviors through a cultural asset lens (Gay 2010). Hence, a fundamental approach to understanding the cultural capital of young learners is to recognize that *different* ways of doing, knowing, communicating, learning, and living do not mean *deficient*.

Cultural capital and young learners

To fully comprehend cultural capital, it is essential to grasp the concept of culture. As researcher Fred Erickson notes, "The term *culture* is slippery in meaning" (2012, 4). He states that "everybody is multicultural" (16) and that

> although important cultural learning occurs in early childhood, such learning continues across the life span; . . . individuals within named social groups differ culturally . . . [as] the result of their participation in differing local communities of cultural practice . . . in which they live their daily lives. (16)

Erickson's notion of "local communities of cultural practice" is a helpful reminder of the personal yet social nature of culture; it encompasses the norms, practices, beliefs, systems, and structures that guide daily living for individuals. This is vital for early childhood educators to understand when working with diverse learners. In short, culture matters.

Different ways of doing, knowing, communicating, learning, and living do not mean *deficient*.

The importance of culture in the learning process cannot be overstated. For example, much of the curriculum, instructional approaches, and assessment mechanisms in US schools are steeped in mainstream (i.e., Eurocentric) ideology, language, norms, and examples—non-White ways of knowing and being are often excluded (Gay 2010; Howard 2010). For example, among many Black students, forms of participation can be very spontaneous and demonstrative, kinship bonds are highly valued, and connecting academic content to prior cultural knowledge is essential (Boykin 1986; Milner 2010; Nasir 2011). This is not to suggest that these factors are not critical for White students. Yet in many preschool learning settings, the expectations for how to perform or behave in school lack cultural nuances that many non-White students depend on for participation and engagement in learning. Eurocentric approaches in schools, even for young learners, prioritize certain ways of talking, learning, sharing, and participating that may be foreign to many children of color. Moreover, books and activities that rarely reflect the experiences, stories, sayings, parables, backgrounds, and histories of children of color can also lead to disengagement and refusal to participate in learning (Bishop 2007).

It is vital for early childhood educators to develop a firm grasp of how students' cultural capital influences the ways students think, speak, process, and make meaning of school situations and circumstances. Education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings stated over two decades ago that culture matters in teaching and learning because culturally relevant approaches are "a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and

attitudes" (1995, 382). It is critical to understand that teaching approaches should not denigrate the use of nonstandard English; instead, they should pay attention to children's social and emotional realities outside of school and affirm students' unique ways of contributing to learning. Being intellectually empowering means recognizing, and even encouraging and praising, students' creativity in expressing what they know; it also means recognizing their prior knowledge as important and necessary to learning new information. Moreover, instructional approaches that are politically meaningful are based on teachers' recognition that even for preschoolers and other young learners, making age-appropriate references to relevant issues in communities where students live and learn can be critical as well. Asking children to talk about what they see in their neighborhoods—people, colors, places, buildings, stores, and the overall environment—can stimulate them to make connections between new learning and familiar knowledge. Incorporating age-appropriate multicultural literature can also be valuable for teachers who are not familiar with the backgrounds of some diverse learners.

Wanting to increase recognition of all students' cultural capital, education scholar Tara Yosso developed a conceptual framework that she terms the Community Cultural Wealth model (2005), which captures the talents, strengths, and experiences that students of color bring with them to the classroom environment. Yosso's model is intended to help teachers understand how students of color access information and learn from a strengths-based perspective. She breaks down the broad concept of cultural capital into six types of capital: (1) aspirational, (2) linguistic, (3) familial, (4) social, (5) navigational, and (6) resistance. The brief explanations that follow include prompts for thinking about ways to incorporate children's knowledge and strengths into the curriculum.

1. **Aspirational capital** is defined as the hopes and dreams students have. Many non-White children and their families have high educational aspirations despite persistent education and economic inequities.

Questions to consider:

› How are we supporting the maintenance and growth of students' aspirations?

› What assumptions do we have about our students' aspirations?

2. Linguistic capital refers to the various language and communication skills children bring to their learning environments. For many children of color, the role of storytelling in their homes and communities is an essential component of linguistic capital.

Questions to consider:

›   How are teachers supporting the language and communication strengths of all students?

›   To what degree are learning environments inclusive of pedagogical practices that recognize diverse linguistic orientations?

3. Familial capital refers to the social and personal human resources children have in their homes and family environments, typically drawn from their extended familial and community networks.

Questions to consider:

›   How can teachers recognize and help students draw on wisdom, values, and stories from their home communities?

›   How can schools create learning environments that honor, respect, and invite families to participate?

4. Social capital emphasizes children's peers and other social contacts, especially how students use these contacts to gain access to and navigate social institutions.

Questions to consider:

›   How do we help children stay connected to their histories, communities, and families by using curriculum and literature that are culturally familiar to students?

›   How do we engage with individuals and community-based organizations about the realities in communities where children live and learn?

5. Navigational capital refers to students' skills and abilities to navigate social institutions, including educational spaces. Students' navigational capital empowers them to maneuver in unsupportive or often hostile environments.

Questions to consider:

› How do we help children navigate early childhood learning environments (e.g., interactions with teachers and peers) if they are new to school or experiencing different learning environments for the first time?

› How are schools willing to acknowledge that many learning institutions, structurally and culturally, have a negative history with—and may still in many ways be unsupportive of and/or hostile to—children of color and their communities?

6. Resistance capital has its foundations in the experiences of communities of color in securing equal

rights and collective freedom. The sources of this form of capital come from parents, community members, and a historical legacy of engaging in social justice and pushing back against injustice.

Questions to consider:

› How do we support children who are committed to engaging with peers who resist because they believe that they are misunderstood or are not being heard?

› What opportunities do we provide students inside and outside the classroom to express themselves when they believe unfair treatment by peers or adults is taking place?

Cultural capital among young African American children

In many early childhood classrooms, well-intentioned teachers (across the racial and ethnic spectrum) misinterpret students' ways of being, exploring, learning, processing, communicating, and knowing as defiant, disruptive, and deficit oriented. To appropriately recognize and intentionally respond to children's cultural practices, teachers must be open to children's different modes of expression and remain mindful of what those cultural practices might look like in school (Gutiérrez & Rogoff 2003).

I offer three brief snapshots of how cultural capital may manifest itself for some African American learners. (Please keep in mind that cultural capital is dynamic: it changes over time, varies across communities, and is not always manifested in the same ways by all members of a particular group. As such, these are examples to deepen understanding.)

You are your brothers' keeper

For many African American students, family is of the utmost importance. Some teachers, however, may not understand how integral family ties and fictive kinship bonds are to many young learners' everyday lives. Yosso's (2005) concept of familial capital helps clarify the way some children's experiences in communal environments result in knowledge that helps them form dynamic connections with family and nonfamily members. Consider the following kindergarten scenario:

> **Teacher:** Children, it is time to go to recess. Everyone except Raymond may go outside, because I need to talk to him about his behavior this morning. [*Classroom aide takes children outside, except Raymond; Edward, another student, hangs back.*]
>
> **Teacher:** Edward, you may go outside; I only need to talk to Raymond.
>
> **Edward:** I will wait for Raymond.
>
> **Teacher:** Why?
>
> **Edward:** That's my cousin, and I just want to make sure he is okay.
>
> **Teacher:** I didn't know you guys were related. Is that true Raymond?

> **Raymond:** Uh, yeah, . . . we are cousins.
>
> **Teacher:** I don't think so. How are you related?
>
> **Raymond:** My mother and Edward's mother are best friends, and we are always at each other's house. So, my mama said we all have to take care of each other. That's why Edward is here, because he knows I might get in trouble, and he wants to make sure I am okay.

This scenario speaks to the important ties between family, care, and responsibility among many African American students. The type of familial capital shown here reflects a connectedness, even though there are no bloodlines or marriage bonds. *Fictive kinship* (as researchers have labeled this concept) is big in African American culture. It is not uncommon for children to claim as siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles people with whom there are no lineages, but there are family connections. Moreover, the idea of looking out for a family member is tied to the belief that many African American parents and caregivers stress—you look out for your family. The notion that you are your brothers' keeper has great relevance in the African American community, and many young learners take the responsibility to heart.

All children come to school with culturally rooted knowledge and dynamic and complex ways of learning.

Questions to consider:

> - How might teachers recognize fictive kinship bonds as legitimate forms of connection among children?
> - Are there similar concepts in other cultures, such as the Asian emphasis on the group over the individual, that could be explored in a class project to deepen children's cultural understanding?
> - How can teachers acquire a better understanding of family, home, and community practices that inform students' notions of connectedness?
> - Should meetings and events that are typically intended for parents be expanded to welcome a broader group of family members and caregivers?
> - Could fictive kinship become a model for increasing connectedness and shared responsibility across the entire school community?

Directives disguised as questions

Another area where African American cultural capital is typically displayed is language. The following dialogue from a prekindergarten class demonstrates how linguistic practices can manifest themselves for many young African American learners.

> **Teacher:** I would like everyone to come and sit down on the carpet for story time. [*All the children come to the rug except Vincent, who remains at a table.*]
>
> **Teacher:** Vincent, would you like to come join us for story time?
>
> **Vincent:** No. I don't want to join.
>
> **Teacher:** Well, I would like you to join us when you are ready.
>
> **Vincent:** But I don't wanna join you.
>
> **Teacher:** We are going to sit on the carpet and begin story time. And when you're ready to join us, please do so.
>
> **Vincent:** I'm not gonna come over there and join you, because you didn't say that I had to. You just asked me if I wanted to come over, and I don't want to.

In this situation, there is a need to recognize the complexity, nuances, and particulars in language and the role that directives—as opposed to questions—can play

A Reason for Hope: Building Teachers' Cultural Capital

By Maurice Sykes

Reading Tyrone Howard's article "Capitalizing on Culture: Engaging Young Learners in Diverse Classrooms," I was struck by his assertion that "it is vital for early childhood educators to develop a firm grasp of how students' cultural capital influences the ways students think, speak, process, and make meaning of school situations and circumstances." This statement brought to mind a teacher preparation program I attended in the late '60s, where we were specifically trained and expected to become teacher ethnographers.

The concept of teacher as ethnographer has its roots in the critical pedagogy movement. For more than five decades, this movement has claimed that the key to a successful multicultural classroom is a teacher who engages in self-reflection while getting to know children as individuals whose cultural capital emanates from the context of their social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances (Freire 1968; hooks 1989; Gay & Kirkland 2003).

Ethnographers can take two different perspectives: outsider or insider. When taking the outsider perspective (which is referred to as *etic*), the ethnographer seeks to be an impartial observer; when taking the insider perspective (which is referred to as *emic*), the ethnographer seeks to understand the meaning and beliefs behind local customs. The teacher-training program that I participated in took the insider approach, including the expectation that teachers would live in the communities where they taught.

An overarching goal of the teacher-training program was to develop a positive view of the rich cultural capital and individual agency that children of color, including those from under-resourced communities, bring to the teaching and learning enterprise. Subsumed in this goal was the belief that teachers' knowledge of self (their own cultural capital) would enable them to invest themselves affectively and effectively in efforts to improve children's achievement.

Investment of self refers to teaching in a way that ensures that high-quality learning experiences occur on a daily basis. Investment of self refers to focusing on developing caring relationships with children, modeling enthusiasm and persistence, and exhibiting special care in personal interactions with each child (Sutherland, Lee, & Trapp-Dukes 1989).

The preparation program's conceptual framework regarding teacher as ethnographer was organized around four essential questions:

1. How do race, class, and gender intersect to create oppressive conditions in society?

2. How do schools serve to reproduce social inequality?

3. How can teachers and students resist oppression?

in communication. Vincent has locked in on his teacher's *asking him* if he would like to join the circle for story time. Perhaps in Vincent's mind, this request is not a directive but merely a suggestion or preference. Vincent might have reacted differently to a polite form of direct communication, such as "Vincent, you *need* to come sit down on the carpet for story time, please." Vincent might have understood that participating in story time was not a choice but the teacher's expectation.

Much has been written about the variations, depth, and complexity in African American English vernacular. It is important to note that many African American educators are viewed as being too harsh or stern in their approaches with young learners. Often lost in

4. How can teachers and students improve students' social and academic trajectories?

Fast-forward to 2018. It is sad but not surprising that these same questions from the late '60s still have agency. And yet, there is reason for hope. Substantial progress has been made in understanding the causes of achievement gaps and the most effective means of addressing them. For young children of color, the achievement gap is real; it starts early, it is persistent, and it is reversible.

As the national debate rages on regarding the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of an excellent early childhood professional, perhaps it would be worthwhile to explore the notion of teacher as ethnographer: What teacher cultural capital is needed for reducing the achievement gap? What would that look like in the context of a 21st century urban school?

A good starting point would be what Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, referred to as the "image of the child" (1994). He stated that the teacher's image of the child is where teaching begins. Therefore, believing in the power of the child as a capable, competent, resourceful learner is the first dimension of the cultural capital that the early childhood professional should bring to the teaching and learning process. This vision requires the capacity to see a child not by the skin color, gender, disability, surname, zip code, or home language, but rather by the promise and possibilities that reside within each child's hopes, dreams, aspirations, and unrealized potential.

The second dimension of the teacher's cultural capital is the capacity to understand the importance of quality relationships: the ability to establish authentic relationships by taking a personal interest in each of the children and conveying to them that they are valued and respected for their cultural agency and that their experiences outside of the classroom are equally as important as their experiences inside the classroom.

The third dimension of the teacher's cultural capital is the capacity to understand the importance of quality conversations: the ability to engage children in meaningful, reciprocal conversations with an appropriate balance of back-and-forth dialogue that models classroom discourse, deepens concept development, builds vocabulary, and promotes accountable talk (Resnick 1999).

The fourth dimension of the teacher's cultural capital is the capacity to understand the quality of experiences: the ability to design and implement a dynamic, robust learning program that is rich in print and conversations that are intellectually stimulating; and where there is a wide range of hands-on, minds-on learning opportunities that build the knowledge and skills that lead to success in school and in life.

The concept of teacher as ethnographer and the four dimensions of teacher cultural capital could serve as key strategies toward improving the social and academic outcomes for children of color. They could also serve as a point of reference as we consider options for developing 21st century early childhood professionals.

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Resisting for a reason

In a second-grade classroom, the teacher reprimands a student for talking when students were supposed to be listening to the teacher. The reprimanded student explains to her teacher that she was not talking, but that her classmate asked her a question and she was merely responding to the question. When the teacher does not acknowledge the student's explanation, the student becomes angry and frustrated because she has to turn her behavior card from green to yellow. (In this classroom, like many others, there is a behavior management system based on color-coded cards: green = good, yellow = on notice, and red = unacceptable behavior warranting intervention.) Returning to her seat, the young girl refuses to work, and her classmate who asked the question also refuses to work. The girls have seemingly made an unspoken pact as a form of resistance to their teacher, whom they believe has not acknowledged the student's legitimate reason for talking.

such assertions is the cultural nuance that, for many African American educators, their approach is serious—not harsh—and is conveying deep caring that is rooted in a request for immediate action. In some of my earlier research, I heard many African American teachers say that they did not have issues of defiance or disrespect from young learners because their students understood the serious tone, tenor, and directness of such firm language (Howard 2010).

Questions to consider:

> How can teachers recognize the subtle messages embedded in their language, phrases, and sayings that can empower or exclude African American (and other non-White) learners?

  ○ Are there adults of color in your workplace with whom you can discuss language meaning and differences in linguistic cultural capital?

> How do we help students maintain their cultural ways of communicating while also learning and using other forms of discourse, including other cultures' English vernacular and academic English?

> How can teachers and administrators become more sensitive to children's different language experiences and thus to differing linguistic cultural capital?

  ○ Could a series of workshops with community members on language and culture help staff learn to recognize when a child does not understand a request, directive, or lesson due to cultural differences?

> Learning can be enhanced by instruction that honors cultural practices and respectfully teaches new practices rooted in other cultures.

Again, Yosso (2005) refers to resistance capital as having its foundations in the experiences of communities of color in securing equal rights and collective freedom. It should be noted that in the face of injustice or in unfair circumstances or situations, resistance can manifest itself even in young learners. This historical legacy of resistance leaves students of color particularly well positioned to leverage their actions as forms of protest, opposition, and what could be interpreted as outright defiance.

Questions to consider:

> How do we support students who are committed to fairness in teaching and learning opportunities?

> How do we see student resistance as a sign of strength and resilience rather than defiance and deviance?

> How can teachers reflect on their practice to make sure their cultural ways of communicating and evaluating are not putting certain students at a learning disadvantage?

Conclusion

Culture will continue to matter for all learners, but it is frequently misunderstood or ignored where students of color are concerned. Early childhood educators must recognize that all children come to school with culturally rooted knowledge and with dynamic and complex ways of communicating and learning. When each child's cultural capital is understood, learning can be enhanced by instruction that honors these cultural practices and respectfully teaches new practices rooted in other cultures.

It is important for educators not to place the onus for cultural adaptation solely on young learners but on themselves as well. Educators must create cultural bridges that allow both teacher and learner to adopt new ways of learning and understanding. While this responsibility should not rest solely on one side (teacher or student), there is an expectation for teachers, as trained, mature professionals, to take the larger share of responsibility and adapt their understanding to young learners' cultural mores. It is not only professionally appropriate, in many ways it is ethically just. It is vital to some of our most vulnerable student populations, and it is critical to creating democratic and equitable learning opportunities for all students.

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