Beginnings Workshop

Cultivating dispositions for cultural democracy

by Luz Casio

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If I'm teaching ten children in a preschool classroom, I am impacting their lives; but with a classroom of ten preschool teachers, I am impacting the life of a hundred children.

I chose to open this article with a thought I had ten years ago about the impact of teaching in the early childhood field, because it speaks to my underlying philosophy and my motivation for shifting my focus from the preschool classroom to working with adults. I wrote it many years ago when asked why I work with children. Teachers often respond, "I love children. I enjoy working with children." However, I work with children because I want to do what I can to impact the quality of their lives and their access to quality education, health care, and integration into society in general. I realized that I could do more by working with teachers. A recent conversation with my 24-year-old son confirmed for me the importance of centering my work in teacher education on cultivating dispositions for cultural democracy.

My son Javier wrote in one of his school papers that he wished I had been more involved in his school when he was younger. This shocked me and provoked a lot of thinking on my part. When Javier was in school, I was a young mom, a Méxican immigrant new to this country, learning English as quickly as I could. From my cultural perspective I thought I was a good parent. I trusted Javier's teacher as the expert. I was very involved in supporting his education behind the scenes by volunteering to do things for his teacher that didn't require proficiency in English. What I now understand is that there was a different set of cultural expectations in Javier's school. However, since these weren't communicated to me directly, I didn't know how I was being viewed or judged at the time by the teacher or by my son. Looking back, I wish the teacher had made more of an effort to get to know me and the values of my culture, and had suggested more ways for me to be involved with the classroom community.

Many years later, I am now a CDA instructor and coach for early childhood educators. I think a lot about the dispositions I want to nurture in teachers, parents, and children so that each is culturally literate and responsive. From my personal experience, and now professional knowledge, these are the dispositions I want to nurture in teachers who work with diverse families. Here I specifically address working with Latino families because that is what I know best, but I think much of it applies to working with any family.

Nurturing habits of mind

An important teacher disposition, or as Katz (1993) would say 'habit of mind' is to wonder why, rather than make assumptions or neglect to consider other possible meanings of behaviors. This is so important when working cross-culturally. For instance, I've seen Euro-American teachers view Latina mothers as weak when they don't stand up for themselves. But in our culture we see self-sacrifice as a skill, a commitment to a relationship, not a weakness. I want to help teachers acquire the disposition of seeking to understand and negotiate different cultural values. This involves always examining one's assumptions and committing to learn about other cultural perspectives. The disposition to be self-aware and eager to learn about others will help teachers understand, for example, that relationships and community are all-important in my culture, and that we make many sacrifices to preserve relationships. If you understand that achievements are celebrated by the community, not just the individual, you might structure school celebrations to be more inclusive.

Recognizing different cognitive styles

The research of several authors supports what many other immigrants intuitively understand and struggle with as we take up the task of becoming Americans

and helping our children succeed in school. Teacher dispositions need to go beyond sensitivity to include the desire to understand and provide for different cognitive styles. Ramirez and Castañeda (1974) remind us why the melting pot won't work, even if it were desirable. For example, consider that Méxican American children are socialized by their families and community to rely on adults for help and guidance. They are encouraged to be inter-dependent, rather than independent. As a result, they develop a different learning or cognitive style than their Anglo-American peers who are encouraged to be independent and think for themselves.

Reading this research, memories came to mind of my years of childhood in Durango, México, where during the primary years of my education I believed totally in my teachers who wanted the best things for me. Here in the U.S., if teachers seek to recognize and understand, rather than judge cultural differences, they can adjust their teaching accordingly. They can support Latino and all immigrant children in gradually becoming bicultural and bicognitive, more independent over time, even as they continue to develop the cultural values of working collaboratively on behalf of their community. Gardner's research (1993) on multiple intelligences could be very useful in informing teachers about different cognitive styles.

Teaching in a culturally relevant manner

I resonate strongly with Ramirez and Catañeda (1974) when they call for culturally democratic educational environments. To develop a culturally democratic classroom, teachers need to embrace the philosophical approach of culturally relevant teaching presented by Ladson Billings (2004) who notes, "Teachers who practice culturally relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others." These teachers have the disposition to "see themselves as a part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community."

I have seen these dispositions in practice in several dual language programs in Seattle that strive for cultural democracy. At Jose Marti Child Development Center and La Escuelita, the commitment from teachers is to create a climate in the classroom that invites children to be themselves. They promote a home and community connection involving the parents in the education of their children with a curriculum that is relevant because it emerges from the needs of the specific families served. The messages in these programs are "I believe in you and yes, you can."

I have also seen the opposite happen in programs where teachers lack this disposition to be culturally relevant. They ignore the importance of honoring the children's languages. When I entered these classrooms, I did not feel connected to what was going on. The climate in the classroom did not make any sense. I thought to myself at the time, "Do the children feel the same way that I am feeling?" When the teachers follow pre-planned monthly themes they seem to ignore how little this relates to the children's culture, family or community. With no consideration for children's different cognitive styles, these teachers seem to be trying to fit all the children in the same box.

These observations have led me to ask questions about the kind of professional development that would nurture early childhood education teachers and provide guidance to them in identifying effective strategies for implementing relevant curriculum. For example, what would be the best way to present research and theoretical frameworks for understanding the socio-political constructs impacting diverse communities? I investigated this question by engaging in a cooperative, bicultural effort with an Anglo American college instructor in designing a literacy class using the Soy Bilingüe Adult Dual Language Model. We drew not only from Cronin and Masso (2007) but also the work of Freeman and Freeman (2004) who outline the political influences on bilingual education and its history.

I share common ground with the ideas of Freeman and Freeman (2004) who say, "Teachers working in Spanish-English bilingual and dual language classrooms must not simply teach their students to read and write: they must teach them to think and act to build a better world." I try to help teachers to understand their role in advocating for the best methods to support children to develop bi-culturally and linguistically and use assessment tools that truly measure children's abilities, skills, and strengths.

Another influence on my thinking is the work of Darder (1991) who speaks to the work of Ramírez and Castañeda (1974) on cultural democracy. Darder's writing focuses on the rights of individuals to continue to develop within the context of their primary culture while interacting with a dominant culture. She recog-

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nizes the power exerted by educational institutions and says,

"If educators are to meet the pedagogical needs of bicultural students, it is essential for them to recognize the ideological underpinnings that shape bicultural responses and contradictions and tensions that result from students' efforts to survive in the midst of serious forms of educational oppression."

Darder suggests ways to think about the dispositions and practices essential for Anglo American teachers if they are to foster cultural democracy for children of color in their classrooms. Her strong message is:

"To even begin to comprehend the bicultural experience requires that teachers from the dominant culture invest time and energy into establishing critical dialogues with people of color if they wish to understand their communities better. Even then, these teachers must recognize and respect that their process of learning and knowing is inherently situated outside that cultural context, and is therefore different from the knowledge obtained from living within a particular cultural community."

My son the teacher

I return now to my son Javier who is now in his second year as an early childhood teacher, because he provides an example of the ideas I have explored in this article. As a bicultural and bilingual educator, Javier draws on his own experience and the support of others in his family and community. He commits himself to being knowledgeable about creating learning environments that are reflective of the cognitive styles of the cultures of the children in his classroom. Reflecting on his own experience as a child, along with his growing professional knowledge, Javier places a priority on developing strong relationships with families and finding comfortable ways for them to be involved in their children's education. He brings pride to our family and community and great hope to the diverse children and families he is responsible for in his work.

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