

## Educating Latino Children: International Perspectives and Values in Early Education

*Mariana Souto-Manning*

*Mariana Souto-Manning is Assistant Professor, Department of Child and Family Development, The University of Georgia, Athens.*

Cultural values are inherent to educational processes. When young children go to school, family and societal values may be either reinforced or challenged as children are socialized. As the ethnicities and cultural backgrounds of students and teachers vary, so do their values. With a rapidly changing student population, ever more diverse, this is a time for early childhood settings to become more responsive to all children's needs while honoring their cultures.

As the number of Latino immigrants increases steadily and rapidly across the United States, early childhood educators need to learn about Latino schooling experiences and expectations to better serve this growing population. Around 20% of all children born in the United States are bilingual and growing up in Latino households. According to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2006), the proportion of Latino children in the United States has increased faster than that of any other racial and ethnic group, growing from 9% of the child population in 1980 to 19% in 2003. This percentage continues to increase.

In employing a bio-ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to child development, we must consider the diverse contextual layers that shape a child's development. Bronfenbrenner's model of the ecology of human development

acknowledged that humans don't develop in isolation, but rather in relation to their families, homes, schools, communities, and societies. Each of these ever-changing and multilevel environments, as well as their interactions, are key to development. According to Barbara Rogoff (2003), development is culturally biological. As such, we must promote culturally responsive education early on to foster both culturally and biologically appropriate developmental conditions. Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching as using cultural knowledge and prior experiences to make learning more appropriate and effective, educating the whole child through the strengths of each. Ladson-Billings (1992) explained that culturally responsive teachers develop intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by "using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 382). Hollins (1996) added that education designed specifically for children from minority backgrounds is made up of "culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content" (p. 13). Culturally responsive teachers address not only the importance of learning academic content, but also the maintenance of cultural identity and heritage.

Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) define learning

as inherently interactive and constructivist (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Of utmost importance is a child's construction of knowledge through interactions with the social and physical environment. DAP promote meaningful learning for each child while accounting for a variety of cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the image of the solitary child constructing her own world in isolation has been prevalent in the fields of child development and early childhood education, with limited attention paid to the significance of the larger social, cultural, and historical contexts (Novick, 1996). In the last 15 years, researchers have begun to understand that learning is a process by which culture and individual development are mutually embedded (Bowman & Stott, 1994).

To implement culturally responsive early education that is developmentally appropriate for Latino children, it is important to look at values that permeate education in Latin America. Therefore, I draw on ethnographic data (interviews, observations, artifacts, and field notes) from early childhood centers and schools in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina as I review research and outline values and perspectives that pervade such practices, hoping to shed light on the educational process of young Latinos in the United States. As I coded extensive ethnographic data col-

lected in Latin American countries between the years 2000 and 2006 employing the constant-comparative methodology (Glaser, 1965), I found common values associated with early education. Understanding these values may enable early educators to move toward enacting developmentally appropriate practices that are culturally relevant. I am aware that while exposing such values, I run the risk of stereotyping all Latin America as sharing the exact same values. Therefore, I want to make clear that these values, while common phenomena, may be manifested differently or not apply in every Latino family.

### Early Education Toward Inclusion: Considering International Perspectives and Values

More and more families from Latino backgrounds have children in early education settings, yet early education has not adjusted widely to include Latino values and perspectives (Zentella, 2005). To fully include culturally responsive values in early education and therefore provide developmentally appropriate educational practices (DAP) that are culturally responsive to Latino children, educators must take several international perspectives into consideration:

- Recognize early education models and values at the group as well as the individual levels.
- Create opportunities for families to participate in the planning of

early education, by creating spaces for their voices to be heard so they may influence outcomes.

- Strive for equality in terms of power and influence of multiple cultural backgrounds, representing the make-up of the classroom, as opposed to mirroring the early educator's own educational experiences.
- Promote integration or acculturation, allowing all students' cultures of origin to be valued, as opposed to promoting the attitude that to live in the United States, one must assimilate. Acculturation is the process whereby the attitudes and/or behaviors of people from one culture are modified as a result of contact with a different culture. Acculturation implies a mutual influence in which elements of two cultures mingle and merge. In contrast, assimilation is a process of cultural absorption of a minority group into the main cultural body, thereby enabling the ruling cultural group to enforce the adoption of their values rather than the blending of values.

Below, I outline some suggestions for including these international perspectives, when working toward making early education truly culturally responsive:

**Recognition of Values.** The first step in including international values in early education is to recognize common ideas and values within and across cultures. In considering such values, we necessarily steer away from stereotypes or general-

izations about a group that assign the same characteristics to virtually all members of a group, regardless of actual variation. The consequences of stereotyping include biased perception, pigeonholing, and making people feel bad about themselves, for example. Keeping in mind that individual families vary, the chart below presents how such ideas vary across groups (Plautt & Thomas, 2007).

We immediately see that while there is overlap across cultures, there are also many differences. While interdependence is valued in Latino cultures, children in Anglo American families tend to be socialized into individualism and independence. This can have serious consequences for a child's development and learning, as borders between microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) tend to be harder to cross for children whose home cultures significantly differ from the school culture (Gee, 1996).

To allow all children an equal opportunity in the early education classroom, educators must recognize the difference of such values and make sure that their interactions, the classroom environment, the themes studied, and other facets of early education incorporate values from multiple cultures (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992). While it is important here not to stereotype, as families and individuals present distinct characteristics, it is helpful to know some of the commonalities and take them into consideration when plan-

Latino values	Anglo American values
Interdependence	Individualism
Familism	Independence
Deference	Future orientation
Past orientation	Choice
Individuality	Control
Pay attention to others' needs	Freedom
<i>Confianza</i>	Equality

Plautt & Thomas, 2007

ning, implementing, and assessing early education programs.

The values commonly embodied by Latino families in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, according to data I collected, are coherent with characteristics described by Plautt and Thomas (2007), as listed on page 183. Below, I elaborate on each of them. While these might be enacted differently across families, they are key values to Latinos and are enacted in educational settings and in parent-teacher relationships.

- **Interdependence**—a dynamic of mutual responsibility, sharing a common set of principles with others. Therefore, independence is not the desirable result. Competitive activities may conflict with Latinos' cultural values.

- **Familism**—a social pattern in which the family's position has priority over individual interests. This greatly influences the attitude of putting family over work and the importance placed on extended families. Since they tend to live close to their extended families, individuals have many resources. Families take care of their elders, and aunts/grandparents care for the young. This support network may change dramatically with immigration and affect a family's functioning. It is important for early educators to be cognizant of this value and understand how contextual change might affect Latino families.

- **Deference**—respect and esteem due a superior or an elder; it may also refer to ingratiating regard for another's wishes. Collective, rather than independent, decisions hold sway.

- **Past orientation**—looking at the past to make future decisions. Latinos value the family legacy and define a person by his or her past. Sociocultural and historical roots are extremely important.

- **Individuality**—total character particular to an individual, as well as distinguishing an individual

from others. Members of Latino families may be encouraged to become interdependent, trustworthy, and reciprocal individuals. If such values are not intrinsic to the classroom culture, children may feel conflicted.

- **Pay attention to others' needs**—responsibility for others' well-being, instead of focusing on individual as primary beneficiary. Often, others' needs are honored over the self. Conflicting classroom situations may involve any activity that places one's needs above others.

- **Confianza**—a feeling of mutual trust that permeates relationships, based on reciprocal practices establishing individual obligations. Such reciprocity is re-confirmed with each exchange and leads to the development of long-term relationships. *Confianza* is extremely important and must be developed reciprocally for a parent-teacher relationship to work.

**Participation & Voice.** Expectations held across and within cultural groups are extremely important when considering participation and voice. Generally, the expectations of the majority and those of the minority differ. In the United States, Latinos often figure in the minority. It is important to understand these differences in expectations as we remember that people can and do disagree (Orbe & Harris, 2001).

The expectations of the majority tend to lean toward assimilation, as described above. Often, immigrant culture is deemed as superficial. Another common belief is that we live in a meritocracy (e.g., color doesn't affect your chances to succeed if you work hard enough). It is extremely important for a majority group to recognize their privileges, especially in the United States, where privileges are based on such aspects as skin color, class, gender, and educational level (Orbe & Harris, 2001). If educators continue to uphold such assumptions, they are

likely to reinforce the status quo of inequality and prejudice. Because the expectations of the majority are often heard, we continue to set up systems that are grounded on such beliefs and continue to disadvantage those in minority groups.

Furthermore, minorities should not be expected to assimilate. There is an inherent belief that people in certain groups have privilege and that the status quo must be challenged. But how? One way to start changing the status quo is to incorporate values from minority cultures in early education. By immersing young children in a variety of perspectives, we create spaces for equality, multiple perspectives, and fostering tolerance and patience.

Some common sources of cultural friction may be:

- **Time**—for example, many Americans define exact starting and ending times for events (e.g., 2-4 p.m.), while Latinos tend to interpret them as windows of time during which one may arrive. In many Latino cultures, events often do not conclude at a prescribed time.

- **Interdependence/Independence**—these values can cause conflict between home and school environments. For example, the expectations for children being able to feed and clean up after themselves can vary across cultures. In many Latino households, it is more common for interdependence to be valued and is expected in the earlier years. However, in a preschool or pre-kindergarten classroom, the value of independence might be so prevalent that it adds focus on the individual, resulting in competitive behaviors in everyday practices.

Many other sources of conflict exist that are not detailed here. I leave it to early educators to listen to Latino parents regarding their perspectives and cultural expectations. It is only by learning about Latino cultures that teachers will

truly foster equality and start building a better world through developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive education. When individuals experience many of these frictions, exiting may be employed as a way to cope. Such an exodus may occur when students become disengaged and/or drop out of school. To avoid a mass exodus, we must consider where students and families come from and their educational systems, which are heavily grounded on community values and expectations.

**Equality.** To implement and live equitable education, educators must examine their privilege as a structure modeled after the skills, practices, beliefs, and opinions of a particular group. Only by challenging and dismantling such a system can we move towards equity. Common elements of privilege that must be examined include:

- Normalcy—"This is how we've always done it."
- Taken for granted—"She should know to bring her child to the center by 8 a.m."

By enacting such aspects of privilege in early education, we fail to enact equity. To strive toward equality, teachers must examine the cultural context in which they grew up as one of many, and they must value students' cultural contexts and make them part of the classroom. The best strategy is looking at international and/or culturally specific approaches to early education.

**Integration.** Finally, all educators must strive for integration. Having children from many cultural backgrounds in classrooms means that early educators must not privilege one cultural context over another. Integration means examining each and every cultural context present in the classroom and bringing them to the classroom in meaningful and authentic ways. If early educators are to implement true integration, they

must analyze their own cultural contexts, and not take them for granted and thus privilege those who share the dominant cultural background. Asking immigrant families to speak English at home for their children to succeed in educational settings is aligned with assimilationist ideas of erasure (e.g., you must erase your previous culture, language, and experiences in order to be successful in your new country). By embracing multiple cultural contexts and learning about schooling in such contexts, early educators and children are more likely to experience a positive atmosphere in which many cultural contexts and values are intertwined and valued.

Integration includes cultural contexts, as well as applying such contexts to classroom practice. It is important that early educators understand why each person deserves respect for his/her cultural context. By privileging one cultural context over another, early educators are promoting assimilation and thereby imposing one cultural context at the expense of another. One example of this is home sleep habits. Children in some Latino families may sleep with their parents more often than do children in Anglo American families. Telling parents that they are hindering their child's development by sleeping with their children past 6 months is a clear example of valuing one cultural practice at the expense of another. In Anglo American families, such practice may conflict with the value of independence. In some Latino families, the practice of co-sleeping may align with the value of interdependence. As a result, integrating practices is extremely important. While cultural contexts may conflict, rules and practices might need to be constantly re-negotiated on individual, group, or class levels.

Authentic integration means that early educators must constantly examine their assumptions and privileges and the impact of enacting

such privileges. Furthermore, in order for early education classrooms to be developmentally appropriate, they must be culturally responsive (Novick, 1996), which means that integrating multiple cultural perspectives is not a choice, but rather an imperative if early education is to embrace the concept of equity and excellence in education for diversity.

## Implications for Early Educators

Important implications for early educators include:

- **Access Funds of Knowledge.** Not knowing about a culture can be a major obstacle to valuing cultural contexts (Cochran-Smith, 1995). Early educators can avoid stereotypes by considering families' practices or funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Specifically, funds of knowledge refer to those historically developed and accumulated strategies (e.g., skills, abilities, ideas, practices, habits) or bodies of knowledge essential to a household's functioning and well-being. As you access funds of knowledge, you will discover that they are diverse and span across many areas (e.g., business, agricultural practices, culinary) and geographical borders. Making such practices accessible in the classroom can contribute to educating all children, and promote appreciation for diversity.

- **Learn About International Educational Systems and Multiple Cultural Practices.** In Brazil, for example, lunch is the major family meal of the day. School sessions operate roughly from 7:30 a.m. to noon, or from 1:30 to 6 p.m. Spending the entire day (7:40 a.m.-2:30 p.m.) and eating lunch at school can be a major shock for a child and his/her family. It directly interferes with the familial practice of getting together to share lunch. By presenting Brazilians with the idea of lunch taking place in schools,

the American educational system impacts an important common practice in their cultural context. Furthermore, lunch is supposed to be a hot meal (often including rice and/or beans) and not merely a cold sandwich. By knowing such information, early educators may be better able to communicate with parents.

• **Combat Stereotypes.** Soap operas are a major part of Latin American entertainment. Many Latino soap operas (telenovelas) have portrayed American schools in a negative light, showing teachers acting in cold and prejudiced ways. As early educators challenge their own stereotypes, it is important that they clearly communicate with parents about their philosophy and classroom practices. This can help dispel some assumptions and stereotypes held by the parents of Latino children. Challenging privileges and the sense of normalcy can help. When communicating with all parents, early educators must not take anything for granted. Rather, they should strive to make the schooling routine, philosophy, and practices transparent, always keeping the lines of communication open.

Ultimately, as we engage in accessing funds of knowledge, gain knowledge about international educational systems and cultural practices, and combat stereotypes, we learn continuously from the young children in our classrooms and their families. To implement and carry out education that is developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive for all, we must: 1) recognize early education models and values, both at the group and the individual levels; 2) create opportunities for all families to participate in the planning of early education, creating spaces for their voices to be heard and to influence outcomes; 3) strive for equality (in terms of power and influence of

multiple cultural backgrounds), therefore representing the make-up of the classroom, as opposed to mirroring the early educator's educational experiences; and 4) promote integration or acculturation, creating spaces for cultures of origin to be valued, as opposed to promoting the attitude that to live in a particular country, all must undergo assimilation. Best of luck!

## References

- Bowman, B., & Stott, F. (1994). Understanding development in a cultural context: The challenge for teachers. In B. Mallory & R. New (Eds.), *Diversity and developmentally appropriate practices* (pp. 19-34). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bredenkamp, S., & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1995). Color blindness and basket making are not the answers: Confronting the dilemmas of race, culture, and language diversity in teacher education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 493-522.
- Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2006). *America's children: Key national indicators of well-being, 2005*. Retrieved October 15, 2007, from [www.childstats.gov/amchildren05/index.asp](http://www.childstats.gov/amchildren05/index.asp).
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, & practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London, UK: Taylor & Francis.
- Glaser, B. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12, 436-445.
- Hollins, E. (1996). *Culture in school learning: Revealing the deep meaning*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1992). Reading between the lines and beyond the pages: A culturally relevant approach to literacy teaching. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(4), 312-320.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Novick, R. (1996). *Developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive education: Theory in practice*. Retrieved October 15, 2007, from [www.nwrel.org/cfc/publications/DAP2.html](http://www.nwrel.org/cfc/publications/DAP2.html).
- Orbe, M., & Harris, T. (2001). *Interracial communication: Theory into practice*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Plautt, V. C., & Thomas, K. (2007, March). *TELL workshop*. Paper presented at the University of Georgia's Teachers for English Language Learners (TELL) Seminar, Athens, GA.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zentella, A. C. (Ed.). (2005). *Building on strength: Language and literacy in Latino families and communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.

## Coming Next Issue

- Read My Dance: Promoting Early Writing Through Dance
- Picture This: Using Photography as a Learning Tool in Early Childhood Classrooms
- Interdisciplinary Literacy Unit: Transformation of Italian Folklore Through Shadow Theater
- An Intriguing Link Between Drawing and Play With Toys
- Allophilia: Moving Beyond Tolerance in the Classroom
- Families as Decision-Makers