

The Effects of Culture on Thinking

by Barbara Bowman

Barbara Bowman is a founder of Erikson Institute,



served as president of the institute from 1994 to 2001, and continues on the faculty. In addition to teaching courses at Erikson, she is Chief Officer for the Office of Early Childhood Education for the Chicago Public Schools, where she administers a program for 30,000 preschool children. She is a past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and served on numerous boards. Honors include honorary doctorates from Bank Street College, Roosevelt University, Dominican University, Governor's State University, and Wheelock College, and the McGraw-Hill Prize in Education.

Thinking is a high priority in the United States today. As brain, rather than brawn, power increases in importance, one of our most pressing economic priorities is to raise the educational achievement of our children. Yet, our goal of educating all children is made more difficult by our history of educationally excluding and marginalizing people who are not white, English speaking, and Christian. Until quite recently, schools (and the nation) shunned poor and minority children, contending they are inherently unable to master the academic curriculum. Genetic research over the past quarter century has challenged this assumption and concluded that the human capacity to learn exists across all racial and social groupings. With a growing population of people of color, speaking a variety of different languages, belonging to many religious groups and ethnic and national communities, the question is not can all children learn, but how to teach them. One of the barriers to teaching and learning is caused by differences in how people think.

We now know that there is a great deal of similarity in human thinking. Piaget's (1967) work is based on the genetic disposition of children to develop in certain ways. He contends that there are universal patterns in development caused by the interaction of the human genetic code and experience. This idea is consistent with the enormous biological overlap scientists have found in all human capabilities.

There is also considerable research that shows some individuals are able to think better than others — earlier, faster, and/or more profoundly. Presumably, their individual genetic make-up and their specific experiences better prepare them for thinking. More recently, Howard Gardner (1993) pointed out that there are different kinds of

thinking and that some of us are better at some kinds than others. We may be more artistic and relational, rather than scientific and logical; or better at verbal tasks than at manual ones. What this tells us is that although people are similar in their potential for thinking, there are individual differences that reflect each person's unique blend of genetic potential and personal experience.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER



Culture is less often recognized as a factor in thinking. However, individuals are shaped not only by their individual genes and experiences, but also by the meaning these are given by the groups within which they live. Culture consists of patterns of beliefs, attitudes, and relationships that a group of people share with one another, including values, morality, myths, language, as well as customs, practices, roles, communication styles. The role of culture in thinking has been highlighted in recent years by the work of Vygotsky (1978) and others who have focused on the role of social interaction in thinking. This has spawned a new understanding of group differences and the role of social experience and language in shaping our human capabilities. Barbara Rogoff (2003), Shirley Brice Heath (1983), and others have called our attention to how groups of people make sense of their world and teach it to their children. While there are certainly individual differences within each group (the range for any characteristic is probably as broad within groups as it is between groups); nevertheless, groups do have shared social structures and practices that give meaning to their thinking.

Most American children share a culture; however, some of us live in more socially isolated groups than others. Children from these groups — segregated by ethnicity, social class, language, and religion — are most likely to have cultural patterns that are different than those found in the mainstream. Unfortunately, they and their parents are frequently misunderstood and they, in turn, often misunderstand the larger society. We miscommunicate because we think our culture's ways of thinking is the right way and if others do not see the world the way we do, there must be something wrong with them.

Most of us are aware that different groups have different practices; but we often assume that these express the same thinking, although we may think they are peculiar. Muslims show their respect for God by taking off their shoes and putting on their hats, while Christians do just the opposite. Both groups honor God, though they do it in different ways. Often when we think of cultural difference we expect just

such minor variations — like whether you eat bagels, corn bread, or fry bread for Sunday breakfast. We tend to be blind to real differences in how people think, differences that set us wondering, “what is wrong with them.” For example, many of us see the weather mainly through a scientific lens. When a phenomenon — like thunder and lightning — are explained by science, we are satisfied, even if we are not scientists ourselves or prefer other types of thinking. Yet, there are groups who think that metaphysical events are more real than those that are explainable with science. They live in a world inhabited by ghosts and other magical objects that cause claps of thunder and flashes of light. We wonder why they don't use science to explain the world the way we do and they wonder why we don't believe in what seems real to them.

Does this mean there are no developmental regularities that cut across cultural differences? Not at all. At one level all humans have the same basic abilities. They can all use language and their senses,

PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER



One of the barriers to teaching and learning is caused by differences in how people think.

Early childhood professionals sometimes misunderstand culture because of our emphasis on developmental norms.

categorize, sequence, symbolize abstract experience, play with ideas, etc. And these abilities come to fruition at similar times. For example, no matter what language children learn, it begins with babbling at 4 to 6 months and ends in community speech by six years. So, there are universal characteristics to thinking. However, the way children use these abilities is determined to a large extent by the cultural experiences they have. How children learn to talk, whom they talk to and who talks to them, and what they talk about is learned. The language children speak also affects their thinking. Most people who speak more than one language say that some ideas are more easily expressed in each language. For instance, base 10 is illustrated more clearly in Chinese where the word for twelve is ten and two than in English where there is a new word for this concept.

Early childhood professionals sometimes misunderstand culture because of our emphasis on developmental norms. We have studied some children, noted the similarities in their development, and assumed that the average represents what normal children do. Children whose ideas and behavior do not conform to normative expectations are often considered delayed, deviant, and or disadvantaged. While in some instances this is true, other times the differences have a cultural explanation. For example, American norms call for children as young as 3 months to sleep by themselves, while other cultures expect children to sleep with someone else most of their lives. Americans expect children to dress themselves by age 4 or 5. Many groups expect to dress children until they are 6 or 7. Americans often think children cannot sit still for long periods, and meals are usually completed quickly. In other countries, quite young children sit much longer as they finish 3-course meals without showing the least discomfort. These differences mean that what is considered normal in one group may not be in another. The differences are neither bad nor good but may be more or less adaptive in some situations. For example, an American child in a French child care center may not sit quietly through a long meal and be seen as hyperactive.



Low-income adults use fewer words in their interactions with their children than do middle class parents; consequently, their children learn fewer words (Hart & Risley, 1995). These children are developmentally competent in their own community, even though their vocabulary may be so small that learning to read is difficult. Children learn to think as their own culture; does it mean they can't learn others' ways of thinking? Not at all; it just means their prior knowledge may or may not easily support the new thing you want them to know. Many kinds of thinking transfer from one language to another, from one situation to another, from one culture to another. For example, if children know a home language in which they understand a concept, they can grasp the same idea in another language quickly, although they must still learn the new word. Similarly, if children are accustomed to responsive parents at home, they will expect alternative caregivers to also be responsive and be better able to get the care they need in a new situation.

Frequently, however, there is not an easy fit between what children already know and what we want them to know. This can create the illusion that there is something wrong with their development. This often is not the case. It may be simply a difference in how they have learned to think. For example, some African American children, accustomed to a more authoritarian interactional style with adults, are confused and misunderstand teachers who are more indirect (Delpit, 1988). Children whose families do not use much formal speech may not understand the language in a book. While listening to a story they may enjoy the rhythm and intonation and never think about what the words mean. For meaning, a child may look at facial expressions or body language and be quite skilled in interpreting these clues to adult thinking.

Children, from birth on, are exposed to their own culture's meaning system, expectations, and practices and their ways of thinking are deeply embedded in these. Understanding cultural differences is not easy. Many of them are subtle and the variations hard to see. Equally difficult is avoiding stereotyping; that is, attributing characteristics to children simply because they belong to a particular group. Children and families live in concentric cultural circles, drawing more from the heritage of one group this time and of the mainstream the next.

As early childhood professionals, we must challenge our cultural myopia and become more sensitive to

these differences among groups in order to help children learn new ways of thinking. The onus is on us to find out how best to teach each child and to adapt curriculum to the differences among children, including their cultural differences.

Bibliography

- Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(3), 280–298.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple intelligences: theory in practice*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Heath, S. (1983). *Ways with words: life and work in communities and classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Piaget, J. (1955). *The language and thought of the child*. New York: Norton, Meridian Books.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Children and families live in concentric cultural circles, drawing more from the heritage of one group this time and of the mainstream the next.

Name-dropping?: Lots of important names are dropped in this article. Do you and your faculty know them? Are you familiar with the theories of Piaget, Gardner, Vygotsky, and the research findings of Hart and Risley? If not, make an effort to find out and understand the writings of these important educators. Consider using a book club format to read, discuss, and come to understanding with your teachers. It may take time AND it will be worth it. Don't stop at understanding. Look for applications such as the ones suggested in the article.

What is normal?: Bowman points out that "normative" may not reflect "normal" for all cultures and groups. Discuss what this idea might mean to your program and to teachers in their classrooms.

Challenging cultural myopia: "Finding out how to best teach each child and adapt curriculum to the differences among children, including their cultural differences" sounds like worthwhile work. Start by having teachers consider their own culture's meaning system, expectations, practices, and ways of thinking by telling their cultural stories. Then move on to sensitizing each teacher to the differences among groups of children within their own classrooms. This journey may be difficult and lengthy, but, as Bowman says, "the onus is on us."

Using Beginnings Workshop
to Train Teachers
by Kay Albrecht