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ABSTRACT

Although early childhood education (ECE) teachers frequently use the concept of the "teachable moment" (TM) when they reflect upon their teaching experiences, there is a lack of discussion in the professional literature regarding what a TM is or how teachers construct the notion of TM-oriented curriculum practice through their interactions with all young children. This qualitative study used the theoretical frameworks of ethnography and heuristics to explore ECE inservice and preservice teachers' TM-oriented practices from the perspective of Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Practice (DCAP), focusing on whether a teacher's TM is relevant to the learner's "learning moment." Participating in the study were preservice teachers enrolled in an ECE field-based curriculum course emphasizing DCAP, their inservice cooperating teachers, and inservice teachers taking the course to update their certification. Participants reflected biweekly on their teaching/observation experiences exemplifying TM-oriented practices under the notion of DCAP. Heuristic field notes were also collected during class discussion and field site visits. Data were analyzed using qualitative coding techniques to identify categories and patterns that presented emerging themes. Findings indicated that most prospective teachers perceived that TM-oriented practice depended upon a teacher's ability to read children's initiation. Many inservice teachers strengthened their TM-oriented practice in responding to special-needs students' unique conditions. To most experienced teachers, TM was based on careful observation and interaction with children, an ability to recognize and interpret their observations according to their understanding of child development, and strong beliefs about what is important to teach. Prospective teachers who tried to emphasize DCAP co-created a valuable and interdependent learning moment. (Contains 51 references.) (KB)

# Critical Inquiry of Teachable Moment-Oriented Curriculum from the Perspective of Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Pedagogy

By

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# Critical Inquiry of Teachable Moment-Oriented Curriculum from the Perspective of Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Pedagogy

## Initial inquiry

How do teachers make sense of teachable moment-oriented teaching? What kinds of teacher consciousness and consistent practices might promote teachable moment-oriented curriculum practice with ALL diverse young children? Is a teacher's teachable moment "truly" or possibly relevant to a "learnable moment" for the learner? Over the last ten years of working with early childhood education (ECE) in-service and pre-service teachers in the context of field-based ECE courses, it has been observed that "teachable moment (TM)" seems to be a frequently used notion among those teachers, especially when they reflect on their "appropriate," memorable, empowering or effective teaching experiences. Often, when I hear their examples of TM, I question whether TM is also equally empowering or fairly meaningful to culturally diverse learners' learnable moment (LM). It seems that the teachers' ethnocentric perspective dominates the process of TM teaching and learning.

There is, however, no literature directly discussing what a teachable moment is, who wields the "real" power during that moment, or how teachers construct the notion of TM-oriented curriculum practice through their interactions with ALL young children from diverse backgrounds (Hyun & Marshall, in press a & b). This paper explores ECE in-service and pre-service teachers' TM-oriented practices from the perspective of developmentally meaningful and culturally responsive critical pedagogy known as Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Practice (DCAP) (Hyun, 1998, 1996, Hyun

& Marshall, 1996, 1997, Hyun & Marshall, in press a & b). This qualitative research explores critical aspects of TM-oriented curriculum practice by questioning whether a teacher's TM is relevant to the learner's LM.

**Literature Review**

"Good" teachers are always on the alert for teachable moments --- tentatively understood as opportunities that may arise when students are excited, engaged, and primed to learn (e.g., Ayers, 1989). Even though no clear definition of TM exists within the literature of early childhood education, the notion of TM typically appears in the context of defining the teachers' role. For example, in Jean Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) work *Emile* (published in 1762), such moments are a teacher's response to the learner's natural growth and interests. Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) suggested that teachers and parents use TM to guide, not distort, the natural development of the individual child (Pestalozzi, 1898). Friedric Froebel (1782-1852) emphasized TM by describing adults' role in children's learning and development: to observe children's natural unfolding and provide activities that will enable them to learn what they are ready to learn when they are ready to learn it (Froebel, 1909). Arnoll Gesell (1889-1961) perceived that the teachers' role was to wait until they could help children develop their inherent qualities and readiness for learning by using careful observation (Gesell & Gesell, 1912). John Dewey (1859-1952) believed that a teacher's responsibility was to carefully observe children's thoughts, feelings, interests, curiosities, impulses, etc. in order to use those occasions as the foundation of a plan and method of instructional procedure (Dewey, 1938, 1916). Jean Piaget (1896-1980) believed that the learner

constructs knowledge through his/her own actions, and that these personally meaningful actions are necessary in order for children to learn. When a teacher provides appropriate manipulative materials for those actions, based on observations of students' interests, development and learning are promoted (Piaget, 1952). Lev Vygotsky (1986-1934) also believed that children construct knowledge, but that their knowledge cannot be separated from its social context. For Vygotsky, knowledge construction was always socially mediated. When a teacher "reads" a child's learning/development moments, the teacher can, in turn, provide the appropriate curriculum needed to build upon the child's interests, strengths, and developments within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova & Leong, 1996). As this brief summary illustrates, the notion of TM was formed in the context of defining the teachers' role (It is important to mention that the foundations for understanding TM consists exclusively of the writings of white males. The historic roots of early childhood education in particular represent the important and tireless work of many pioneering women, including Maria Montessori, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Mildred Parten, Elizabeth Peabody, and Katherine Read).

Recent research addressing the TM refers to it as the interweaving nature of learning lived through experiences (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Sipe, 2000); those times the flexibility of the teacher allows her/him to value the children's thinking and to change his/her plans (Pourdavood & Fleener, 1997); a moment prompted by something that was said by a students (Schnur-Laughlin, 1999); or a type of learning that happens at times that are more memorable and dramatic because people learn what they need to know when they need to know it (Freeman, 1994).

Other literature does not clearly define what a TM is, but uses it as an important pedagogical approach. For example, Yvonna Lincoln (1989) uses the idea of TM in the process of sensitizing students to the special ethical concerns of field work in qualitative study; Dyson (1998), Gee (1999), and Moll, Diaz, Estrada, & Lopes (1992) all seem to be using it in contexts of teachers/adults helping to promote learners' early emergent literacy development; and Marie Pagliaro (1991) provides examples of how a crisis can be used as a TM to lead students through an interdisciplinary, active approach to learning. In short, according to these authors, there is no single understanding or in-depth exploration of teachers' sense making of TM oriented teaching with respect to how it shapes their curriculum practice.

**Research Questions**

Focused research questions in the study were as follows:

- How do teachers make sense of TM oriented teaching?
- What are the critical aspects of teachers' TM oriented curriculum practice?
- Is a teacher's TM "truly" relevant to a LM for the learner?
- How are learner and teacher identities transformed in TM oriented curriculum practice?
- What does TM oriented curriculum mean to the teachers?
- How does TM oriented curriculum support developmentally and culturally appropriate practice (DCAP) that is congruent for ALL learners?

**Theoretical frameworks**

In this qualitative research, two theoretical frameworks guided me in setting up the research questions, forming research methods, and collecting and analyzing data:

- Ethnography used to explore "what is the culture of this teacher's and the children's teaching and learning experiences?"
- Heuristics used to explore "what are the teacher's experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of the children who also experience the phenomenon intensely/directly?"

**Conceptual Frameworks**

Conceptual framework guides qualitative researchers' interpretation of emerging themes from the data. The main conceptual frameworks guided me in the process of interpreting data were as follows:

- Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Practice (DCAP) (Hyun, 1998; Hyun & Marshall, 1996; 1997; in press a; in press b): It intends to help prospective teachers develop multiple/multiethnic perspective-taking abilities and culturally congruent critical pedagogy so that they can incorporate the cultural diversity of the children into their equal, fair and culturally congruent teaching. This approach ultimately aims to make early childhood education for all individual--multicultural. The critical pedagogy base DCAP focuses on an essential aspect: consideration of the learner's individual cultural background as shaped by his/her everyday experience at home and in the community. It is this importance of children's' *home culture* that connects DCAP. Successful early childhood education relies more on consistency between home and school cultures than on formal education at any other level. Thus, maintaining cultural congruency between young learners' home and school experience becomes the core of DCAP.

  DCAP is pertinent not only to ethnic groups but also to ALL young children who are:
  - experiencing multi-directional developmental growth and change;
  - constructing unique way of knowing and one's own intelligences based on the way they perceive the world within the cultures they encounter which

are different from adults as well as each other;
- facing continuous new social-cultural changes as they grow;
- living in a family structure, cycle, and environment that are dynamic and changeable.

Based on this background knowledge, the teachers' dialectical thinking comes into play in their reflection, that is, by critically inquiring whether every child in the classroom has received an equal and culturally congruent teaching and learning experience for their developmental changes and growth. The teacher strives to learn about and understand each child's unique family influence, which directly affects the child's growth, learning, and problem solving skills. This dialectic leads the teacher to reflect on how she or he can use the child's unique background as a powerful instructional tool for all children in the classroom. This kind of fundamental reflective thinking used with the teacher's actual everyday practice would be called developmentally and culturally appropriate practice. Such reflection helps to ensure that the teachers consider multiple and diverse viewpoints as well as long-term social and moral consequences of their decisions. Teaching in this fashion will more likely result in education that is truly multicultural--that is for ALL children.

- John Dewey's Notion of Effective Teacher (Dewey, 1916, 1938): The learner's personal internal reaction (thoughts, feelings, interests, curiosity, impulse, etc.) and desire should be used as a starting point; the teacher's responsibility is to carefully observe and use that occasion for the formation of a plan and method of activity. In short, Dewey emphasized the importance of establishing continuity between the learner's world of experiences and a curriculum that arose from and further developed those experiences.

- Multiple/multiethnic Perspective-Taking (Hyun & Marshall, 1997): Multiple/multiethnic perspective-taking is, in short, an individual's cognitive capacity to construct his/her understanding of self, other, and social phenomena through first-, second-, and third-person perspective-taking. The ability to step out of one's own cultural paradigm and assume that the existence of multiple realities inevitably leads to divergence in all human endeavors is the ultimate form of multiple/multiethnic perspective-taking. Multiple/multiethnic perspectives represent diverse peoples' diverse understandings of living, problem solving, learning, and so on, as derived from not only their intra- ethnic phenomena (each family's ethnic and cultural formation that is unique to their own "group" ethnic cultures) but also their inter- ethnic relations (ethnic "group" culture that interacts with each individual family culture).

- Critical Pedagogy (Giroux, 1997; Giroux & Simon 1989): Critical pedagogy refers to classroom teaching that proceeds from a consideration of children's everyday lives and experiences. It begins with several fundamental questions which can be raised by reflective teachers, such as: (a) What relationships do my

students see between the activity or the work we do in class and the lives they live outside of our classroom? (b) Is it possible to incorporate aspects of students' lived culture into the work of schooling without simply confirming what they already know? (C) Can this incorporation be practiced without devaluing the objects and relationships important to students? and (d) Can this practice succeed without ignoring particular groups of students as "other" within a "dominant" culture? As evidenced through such questions, the notion of critical pedagogy is fundamental to education that is multicultural because "critical pedagogy is based on the experiences and viewpoints of students rather than on an imposed culture" (Nieto, 1992, p. 221).

- Emancipatory Knowledge (Giroux, 1997; Slattery, 1995): Embracing cultural pluralism coincides with realization of emancipatorical knowledge. The complexity begins with one's autobiographical realization of one's self and family identities. Without awareness and acceptance of one's own multiple identities and complexities, individuals risk failing to perceive and respect the equally genuine and complex cultural differences of others, a failure which prevents the development of multiple/multiethnic perspective taking abilities (Hyun & Marshall, 1997). The resulting "cultural myopia" severely diminishes democratic practices for culturally pluralistic schooling and curriculum that celebrates multiple forms of knowledge construction as emancipatory knowledge. Appreciating cultural pluralism leads to the realization that all knowledge results from interpretation that is derived from one's own identities, backgrounds, and experiences. This realization, basic to a pluralistic orientation, leads teachers to value emancipatory knowledge that is constructed by individual learners for themselves, on their own terms, as they act to change their worlds. It is the desire to promote pluralistic emancipatory knowledge like this that guides teachers' critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1997; Lather, 1986; O'Loughlin, 1992).

**Research Contexts, Participants, and Data Collection**

Three field-based ECE curriculum courses from three different teacher education programs at PSU, CUP, and FGCU were used as the contexts of the data collection. Participants were composed of three different groups:

1. pre-service teachers who were enrolled in a ECE field-based curriculum course that emphasizes DCAP;
2. in-service cooperating teachers who were working with the pre-service teachers; and

3. in-service teachers who had to take the course to update their ECE teacher certification.

The participants were asked bi-weekly to reflect on their field-based teaching/observation experiences that would be examples of TM oriented practices under the notion of DCAP. They were asked to write a reflective note (regular note or e-mail), orally present the case in the class, or post the experiences on the course electronic web board. Researcher's heuristic field notes were also collected during the class discussion and the field site visits.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed qualitatively using data reduction, unit analysis, open, axial, selective, pattern coding, and memoing (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to find categories and patterns that presented emerging themes. *Open coding* is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data. I used this coding system as the first procedure for the data analysis to study the data. *Axial coding* is a set of procedures whereby data are put back together based on the research focus to see what have made up the participants' objectified intersubjectivity of TM oriented practice. *Selective coding* is the process of selecting the core categories, systematically relating them to other categories, triangulating and validating those relations, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development for ground theory building. Based on the results from the selective coding, I present the findings in the following section.

**Findings and Discussion**

Finding 1:

As J. Dewey's notion of effective teacher--the teacher's responsibility is to carefully observe and use that occasion for the formation of a plan and method of activity--most prospective teachers perceived that TM oriented curriculum practice depended upon a teacher's ability to read children's initiation. LM was up to teacher's TM.

*Example:*
*"...The second grade class has many centers [but] the one in which I [ECE prospective teacher] encountered the teachable moment was the science center. The children started with caterpillars and watched as they [the caterpillars] formed their cocoon, then hatching from the cocoon and turning into butterflies. However, one of the insects had difficulty hatching from its cocoon. Both the head teacher and the student teacher stopped what they were doing and discussed what was occurring, asking what students felt they should do. Ultimately, the student teacher did 'surgery' on the cocoon to help the butterfly escape. The children expressed many ideas to help the butterfly and great concern about whether the butterfly would live. Myself [the ECE prospective teacher], the head teacher and the student teacher were very thrilled to be able to take the time to answer and explain questions and concerns the children had. (MS' reflection, posted on Internet WebBoard 1999. PA)*

In most cases, prospective teachers seem to perceive that a TM presents itself when the student expresses an interest or readiness. It is a window of opportunity for teachers to move to another level of teaching.

Finding 2:

Many ECE in-service teachers who were working with an inclusive group of children seemed strengthening their TM oriented curriculum practice in responding to the special needs children's unique conditions.

*Example:*
*My curriculum is always evolving with teachable moments that are based on my daily observations of the children. For example, when I was supervising children during their free playtime in the playground, I saw Brian, who was wearing a hearing aid and eyeglasses, passing near the swing set Akiko was on. When the swing almost hit Brian's face and arm I rushed to check whether he was O.K. At the same time I was thinking, this is a teachable moment to teach about playground safety. These children need to know Brian's (special needs) uniqueness as well as the needs of maintaining a safe environment for all. Of course, we talked about this the first day of preschool, but this incident led me to repeat it, because safety is so important...especially for a child like Brian who needs special attention due to his hearing and sight problems. Of course, safety is also important for me to keep my license!" (SK's reflection, from academic journal and class discussion, State College, PA, 1994).*

The in-service teacher makes sense of her TM oriented curriculum practice in relation to her on-going observations guided by what she believes are important matters for young children's learning (safety in this case) and her professional work as an early childhood educator. Considering Brian's unique conditions works to strengthen her sense of TM. Teacher's awareness of young children with special needs seems strengthening his/her teacher-oriented TM curriculum practice. Much in-depth phenomenological study is needed in understanding ECE teacher's TM oriented curriculum practice in inclusive classroom settings as well as self-contained classroom settings for special needs children.

Finding 3:

To most experienced teachers, TM was based on careful observation in interaction with children, an ability to recognize and interpret their observations according to their

understandings of child development theory, and a strong set of beliefs about what was/is "important" to teach.

Example:
Mrs. Englishwill, who has taught preschool and kindergarten for 32 years in both private and public settings: *"In my kindergarten, learning letters and numbers is very important due to the [importance of] children's 1st grade school readiness. Let me tell you about my Angelo. He is a Hispanic child who used to use a mixture of English and Spanish when he spoke. I was concerned about his language limits. He could not say one full, clear sentence in English. One day, I observed Angelo pointing at all the alphabet letters one-by-one and saying the name of each letter in English, not only in the order of the alphabet but also randomly. He did the same with the numbers 1 to 10, which were on the poster board in my classroom. From that observation, I knew that Angelo knew all the letters and numbers we were learning in class. He used to say them in Spanish, but not any more. That's a good sign, because he has to learn and use English in order for him to learn at school. Now he knows letters and numbers [in English]. However, each time he writes his name on a sheet of paper, he always seems to have difficulty writing the letters. Not all of his letters show the correct shapes; it almost looks like three-year-old scribble. His ways of holding pencils, crayons, and thick markers are very clumsy. Since his family is very poor, he may not have enough materials like pencils, crayons, markers, papers etc. to play with at home. Thus, a limited opportunity with proper materials may have been a cause of Angelo's developmental delay. We know from Piagetian theory how important playing with manipulatives is for young children's development. That was apparently missing in his home setting, I think. Based on this observation, I [also] interpreted that Angelo had very limited eye-hand coordination and a lack of small muscle development. As soon as I knew that his developmental delay was not an intellectual, but a physical matter, I needed to consider providing some play-oriented activity for him to exercise his coordination and small muscle development. The next day, in the morning free play time, I saw that Angelo was playing with Play-doh and building a very descriptive truck. He said to me, "It's my truck!" At that moment I saw that his fine motor skills seemed very adjusted. So, I decided to take advantage of that moment and show him ways to make other kinds of cars. I also modeled ways to build alphabet letters to make the word TRUCK... Afterward, each time he attempted to write his name I reminded him of the way we built the letters of TRUCK using Play-doh --- carefully and slowly, by looking at each alphabet letter in the chart. That teachable moment helped Angelo to practice his nice, neat and correct handwriting skills (EG's reflection, academic journal and class discussion, 1997, FL)."*

In many cases, teacher's observation and interpretation of culturally diverse children's growth and learning behaviors were based on the teacher's limited knowledge of child development and monolingual dominant school culture. Teacher's pedagogical inherence

of engaging critical pedagogy or appreciating emancipatorical knowledge construction was very limited. Mrs. Englishwill's typical developmental psychology orientation, Piagetian in this case, prompted her to see Angelo as developmentally delayed: She imagined that his materially deprived home environment lacked play-oriented learning experiences with proper materials. This (imagined) deprived home context, she surmised, must have led to his lack of eye-hand coordination and fine motor skills in his writing. Furthermore, her acceptance of monolingual-dominant school culture led to her perceives Angelo's emerging bilingual capability as a language deficiency. Based on this type of observation and interpretation, and guided by specific subject matters that she believed to be important for kindergartners, the teacher's teachable moment-oriented curriculum was constructed in ways that reinforced her routine daily practices.

Finding 4:

As Anna Freud mentioned, "teaching is learning twice: first, one learns as one prepares for one's students, and then one learns from them, as one works with them" (Coles, 1992: 53; Britzman & Pitt, 1996:117). Prospective teachers who attempted to emphasize DCAP transformed herself into an effective learner by using her second-person perspective-taking to make the TM equal to a LM for both the teacher and the learner. An equally shared sense of empowerment emerged as they co-created a valuable and interdependent learning experience.

Example:

*As the children in the kindergarten class where I am interning were coloring the letter 'B' page of their 'Letter People Alphabet Books' (not DCAP, but hold on), a Mexican-American child was counting the buttons around Mr. B which he had colored many different colors. He would count, for example, 'Uno, dos, tres*

*butones verde' (forgive my Spanish). When I noticed what he was doing I knelt beside his table and repeated whatever sequence he said. He instantly became the 'Spanish teacher' and I soon realized the frustration [second-person perspective-taking] of learning a new language, especially when learning the word for 'purple.' He would say it over and over again to help me learn it. Once, I said a series of words correctly and he patted me on the back and said 'Muy Bueno' [it means very nice in English]. The child took a typical worksheet and turned it into a wonderful teachable moment!! I was the learner in the child's meaningful learning process! (ECE prospective teacher, LD's reflection posted on Internet WebBoard 1999. FL)."*

In this case, the lesson began as a typical, teacher-driven "worksheet" experience. There was no rich context the child could engage in, no play-based learning experience to construct the concept of the letter 'B.' However, the child's connection-making between what he was learning (the letter 'B') and what he already knew (the concept of button and counting numbers in his own language) turned the worksheet activity into fully self-initiated, self-directed, self-engaged learning experience. At that moment, it was the prospective teacher, who was able to exercise multiple perspective-taking and transformed herself into a learner. Allowing the child to be a teacher, it created emotionally, cognitively and culturally meaningful learning experiences for each child. For the teacher, it was a LM to become an effective teacher, and for the learner it was a TM to become an empowering learner.

**Conclusion**

John Dewey (1938, 1916) explained the importance of the social dimension of education that underlies the healthy growth of all individuals. He believed that curriculum could no longer be justified as solely academic and intellectual or solely vocational and social. Any subject or activity chosen for or recommended to individual

students should contribute to their intellectual and social development as well as their personal development. The learner's personal internal reaction (thoughts, feelings, interests, curiosity, impulse, etc.) and desire should be used as a starting point; the teacher's responsibility is to carefully observe and use that occasion for the formation of a plan and method of activity. In short, Dewey emphasized the importance of establishing continuity between the learner's world of experiences and a curriculum that arose from and further developed those experiences.

However, in order for us to create truly meaningful, fair, congruent, and equally empowering learning environments for ALL diverse children in a pluralistic learning community that celebrate emancipatory knowledge construction (Giroux, 1997; Slattery, 1995), Dewey's notion of an effective teacher --- one who follows teachable moment-oriented curriculum practice exclusively in the service of transmitting a culture and in relation to "educational" experience --- must change. In DCAP-based teachable moment-oriented curriculum practice we (teachers and learners) re-construct teacher and learner images as transformative identities to allow young and old alike to explore new, emerging meanings. We do this not to ensure or perpetuate pre-existing knowledge and power, but rather to empower us to be who we are in the process of becoming. Teachable moments, from this perspective, represent new emerging ways for us to learn from each other by temporarily ignoring our institutional identities (teacher, learner) in order to become participating members of an interdependent teaching and learning community.

Note) This research paper presents a part of collaborative work done by E. Hyun and J. D. Marshall. More in-depth discussion on critical inquiry of teachable moment-oriented curriculum practice will be available in Hyun, E. & Marshall, J. D. (in press). Critical Inquiry of Teachable Moment-Oriented Curriculum Practice in Early Childhood Education (ECE). *Journal of Curriculum Studies*.

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