

Getting to Know You: Sharing Time as Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culturally Relevant Teaching—Learn how to incorporate it into your classroom.

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For many children in Pre-kindergarten (PK) and Kindergarten, school is the first time during which they interact with others who have different cultural backgrounds. In early childhood settings, children encounter classmates who may look, speak, and behave differently than they do. These encounters with others who appear to them to be different can lead to acceptance or exclusion behaviors. Such behaviors may be attributed to a number of factors, such as individual dispositions, lack of familiarity, racial preferences that reflect societal discrimination, and the media (Ramsey, 2006).

**Culturally relevant
teaching makes
connections
between children's
school, home and
community.**

Early childhood educators have a responsibility to foster healthy relationships as well as appreciation and acceptance for diversity through culturally relevant teaching in their classrooms. Culturally relevant teaching, a term that has been written about extensively (e.g., Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Nieto, 2010) involves intentionally making connections between children's school, home, and community by "integrating cultural experiences, values, and understandings into the teaching and learning environment" (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011, p. 67).

In the majority of PK and kinder classrooms, sharing time is one of many events during the day in which children purposely or spontaneously reveal nuances of their individual cultural backgrounds. The decision to include sharing time in the daily schedule is therefore one way to engage in culturally relevant teaching. When effectively employed, sharing time can provide children with opportunities to explore in sensitive and meaningful ways the uniqueness of themselves and others. In doing so, children can gain cultural knowledge and understanding, which can lead to valuable social and academic skills and most importantly to acceptance and value of others. Thus, sharing time in early childhood classrooms allows for culturally sensitive teaching.

Each Child in a Classroom is Unique

All children bring unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is important for teachers to understand the definition of culture so that they can develop ways to incorporate culture in the classroom particularly in their teaching. *Culture*, as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement includes, "customary beliefs and patterns of behavior, both explicit and implicit, that are inculcated by the society or by a social, religious, or ethnic group within the society," (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 13). Such definition has a tremendous influence on children's thoughts, actions, and ways of being and influences children's behaviors and interactions within classrooms.

Teaching children to view cultural diversity as an asset is crucial in today's increasingly multicultural society. Children in the same class may speak different languages, celebrate different religious holidays, and enjoy different kinds of foods. Even in classes where children



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

A prekindergarten classroom may be the first time that children interact with others from different cultural backgrounds.

share similar ethnicity, race, and/or language(s), variations in background experiences and family expectations exist. For example, gender expectations may vary from family to family in terms of the types of toys children are encouraged to explore, such as dolls for girls and trucks for boys. Value systems may also differ among families. In some families, developing a sense of independence at a young age is desirable, while with other families, dependence on others is favored (Gonzalez-Mena, 2008).

According to NAEYC's position statement on developmentally appropriate practice, "As children grow up, they need to learn to function well in the society and in the increasingly global economy and to move comfortably among groups of people from backgrounds both similar and dissimilar to their own" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 13-14). Early childhood teachers play a key role in children's development along these lines.

Culturally Relevant Teaching in Early Childhood

Culturally relevant teaching is a way of deliberately capitalizing on students' individual and cultural differences to promote learning (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Teaching practices that demonstrate respect and appreciation for culture and background experiences are significant catalysts for academic learning (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Menchaca, 2001). These practices require that teachers possess certain capabilities, including the following:

- Viewing cultural differences as assets
- Creating caring learning communities where individual differences and cultural diversity are valued
- Using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, group dynamics, instructional

strategies, and relationships with students (Gay, 2010, p. 31).

Early childhood educators who view cultural diversity in a positive and accepting manner through their words, actions, and expectations are more likely to instill a sense of pride in their students' cultures than teachers who fail to acknowledge culture's role in children's social development and cultural understanding.

Teaching children to value themselves and their classmates as unique individuals begins with an understanding of the significance of individual family life and culture. In its position statement, "Valuing Diversity for Young Children," the Southern Early Childhood Association notes that early childhood educators who value diversity express their appreciation and respect through their interactions with children and in the curricular and instructional materials they use (McClain, ND). For example, classroom displays, books and read-aloud selections, and pretend play props such as household items in the home-living center should represent diverse families and cultures.

Effective early childhood teachers understand the importance of establishing caring learning environments for children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). This is a key element of culturally relevant teaching. Caring teachers not only expect academic, social, and emotional growth in each of their students regardless of race, class, gender, or other types of diversity; they also support this growth through committed, creative, intentional ways. Caring teachers consider how family life and children's background experiences influence behavior in order to support learning in ways that build on what young children are coming to know

and understand about themselves, their families, and other children in their class. These teachers also seek opportunities to strengthen their knowledge of ethnic and cultural diversity, and they reflect on ways culture influences their teaching (Gay, 2010).

Capitalize on children's differences to promote learning.

Teachers who apply culturally relevant pedagogy “[use] the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Gay, 2010, p. 31). Rather than adopting a “one size fits all” ap-

proach to instruction, these teachers intentionally seek to capitalize on their students' diversity as a medium for learning. For example, teachers might invite families to become active participants in the learning environment by sharing stories, experiences, and songs, and activities that represent their cultural and linguistic backgrounds (NAEYC, 1995).

Culturally relevant pedagogy can be implemented in early childhood classrooms in numerous ways. Small and large group sharing time can provide both deliberate and spontaneous opportunities to guide diversity learning among the children. Sensitive interactions and discussions during sharing time can support and promote children's individuality and diversity.

Time to Share

In a survey of nearly 400 teachers (Kindergarten through grade 2),

Robyn Ann Cusworth (1995) found that most teachers incorporate some form of sharing time into their daily practices. The age-old form of sharing time, traditionally referred to as “show and tell,” involves individual students talking to the whole class about an object or event relevant to their personal lives. Over the years, other forms of sharing time have evolved, such as think-pair-share conversations with a classmate, small group sharing, one-on-one sharing between teacher and student, and using message boards and digital albums as part of the sharing experience (Fantozzi, 2012; Martinez, Laster, & Conte, 2010). Topics may include personal items or events, classroom and playground experiences, imaginative story telling, and any number of other subjects. Teachers have historically used sharing time in a variety of ways and in all grades.



Photo by Subjects and Predicates

Children's books can be an excellent catalyst for promoting culturally relevant dialogue.

Benefits

Scholars have documented various benefits of sharing time in classrooms with young children. For example, because sharing time engages listening and talking, it is a language-based endeavor. Thus, it promotes language and literacy learning for both speakers and audience members (Blank, 2012; Cusworth, 1995; Martinez et al., 2010). Karen Gallas (1994) described a first grader in her classroom who “could hardly talk” (p. 20) when she enrolled, whose listening and speaking participation during whole group sharing time contributed to significant growth in verbal skills over the course of a few months. This student’s early participation during sharing time was characterized by long pauses, “unintelligible” language, and difficulty using basic vocabulary while narrating (Gallas, 1994, p. 20). However, with practice and support from her teacher and classmates, the child’s oral language skills progressed and she became a favorite storyteller in the class.

When carried out in sensitive and developmentally appropriate ways, sharing time also has strong potential to promote self-confidence and independence (Burrell cited in Daily, 1997; Martinez et al., 2010). For example, allowing young children to talk about a personal object during sharing time can help them build confidence in speaking in front of others without feeling like the focus of attention. Instead, the object itself is the focus, and the speaker can talk about the object’s name, use, and what makes it interesting to him or her. Other children may feel more comfortable simply talking about their experiences, real or imaginary (Blank, 2012; Gallas, 1994). Over time, the process of sharing and

listening to classmates can lead to a sense of trust among students and confidence in their ability to communicate their ideas.

Importantly, sharing time may be used to promote cultural understanding and an appreciation for others (Blank, 2012; Cheatham & Ro, 2010; Poveda, 2001). Sharon Murphy (2003) described an episode of sharing time in which three public school first graders collectively shared with the whole class what they had been learning about the Jewish holiday of Purim in Hebrew school. In this case, the teacher abandoned her usual sharing time procedures (which were largely teacher-controlled and ritualized) by asking clarifying questions about the holiday and by allowing other students with knowledge of Purim to add to the sharers’ story. Neither the teacher nor the majority of the class possessed knowledge of the holiday, and these students’ sharing time became a type of cultural lesson. This example resulted from an open invitation by the teacher to share a story about what happened during the weekend; there was no expectation that culture would enter the conversation. As the examples at the end of this article illustrate, sharing time can also be carefully planned to incorporate cultural knowledge and experiences.

Cautions

There can be risks to sharing time, even when a teacher intends to promote an appreciation for cultural diversity. For example, when sharing time is used in the traditional form of “show and tell” (i.e., bring an object from home to talk about in front of the class), there is a risk that children can become competitive or focus on items that evoke envy in

others. These sharing sessions may become materialistic in nature and involve expensive or highly desired objects, toys, or electronics. This can be troubling for children from families whose value systems are not materialistic or who have limited income and resources. Subsequent issues, such as envy, can lead children to negative interactions (e.g., hoarding, claiming as one’s own, or breaking another’s show and tell item). Additionally, there is the risk of children bringing inappropriate or dangerous objects such as toy or real weapons and other items that belong to adults and are not intended for show and tell (Dailey, 1997). These risks point to the need for teachers to be sensitive to diverse family income levels and to children’s responses to sharing time. Offering clear guidelines about what is and is not appropriate for sharing time and supporting children’s sharing of hand-made items, photographs, jokes, and story telling can help address these issues. It is also important for teachers to understand children’s developmental age in order to understand their feelings and emotions towards not having the same object as their peers.

There is also a risk that early childhood teachers may attempt to assume too much control over dialogue during sharing time (Poveda, 2001). Teachers should avoid managing sharing time to the extent that children are prevented from asking and answering questions of each other, are held to rigid time frames for sharing, or are held to inflexible narrative formats. These practices deprive children of opportunities to engage in richer, deeper learning experiences that can lead to community building and open communication about individual similarities and differences. Although sharing time

requires teacher guidance, it should be managed in flexible, child-centered ways that allow for authentic, imaginative discussions among children (Cusworth, 1995; Dailey, 1997).

Finally, when sharing time is the only avenue used to incorporate children's culture into the learning environment, there is a risk that children will be denied opportunities to make meaningful connections between their home lives and the curriculum in integrated, holistic ways. This is not culturally responsive teaching. Sharing time should be one of many opportunities for children to express themselves as unique individuals and to show "who they are" within the classroom community.

O.P.E.N. (Outline, Prepare, Engage, Notice) to implement classroom activities.

Making Sharing Time a Culturally Relevant Experience

How can teachers intentionally transform ordinary sharing time into culturally responsive, meaningful learning opportunities? Because "cooperation, community, and connectedness" (Gay 2010, p. 38) are cornerstones of culturally relevant teaching, successfully implementing this type of sharing time requires teachers to encourage dialogue among children and to guide discussions in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Teachers may find the acronym O.P.E.N. (Outline, Prepare, Engage, Notice) a helpful guide toward these ends:

- **Outline** the intended outcomes/lesson objectives. Decide ahead of time what children will be expected to learn or practice during sharing time. Outcomes may be as general as practicing speaking and listening or as specific as orally responding to simple stories about anything that is significant in their lives such as holidays like Hanukkah or Christmas, to encouraging children to develop stories about their families and the places that are important for them. Identifying outcomes in advance can help you monitor children's talk and steer conversations toward your learning goals.
- **Prepare** the class by providing directions, models, and examples. Explicit instruction about taking turns or listening to classmates can help foster participation and meaningful dialogue. Many teachers find that role-playing with a child in front of the class is an effective way to model dialogue for sharing time.
- **Engage** the class in sharing time by prompting conversations with questions such as, "When have you felt like...?" or "I wonder what might happen if...?" Open-ended questions such as these invite children to draw from their own experiences, and they communicate openness to individual perspectives. With practice and guidance, children will begin to ask and answer their own questions, reducing the need for teacher prompts.
- **Notice** who is not participating and when the conversation moves away from the intended outcomes. Children might not participate in sharing time for a number of reasons, such as being

an English learner, having family values that prevent calling out in a group, or feeling insecure about what they can contribute. Noticing who is reluctant to share and seeking ways to draw all children into the dialogue with sensitivity are important aspects of culturally relevant sharing time.

When selecting topics for sharing time, consider those with which children in your classroom can easily relate. Meaningful conversations can take place when children are familiar with and interested in the topics. Two excellent sources of sharing time topics that can help promote culturally relevant conversations are artifacts and children's literature. Suggestions for using both types of materials in PK and Kindergarten classrooms are described below.

Personal/Family Artifacts

During sharing time, children can be invited to show personal artifacts or photos from their homes that represent family life. Examples might include photographs of siblings, specially made blankets, favorite holiday decorations, or simple toys passed down from generation to generation. These kinds of items have personal significance to young children and can be springboards for inquiry, observation, and discussion. Talking about differences between objects from the "past" and "present," noticing artifacts that classmates have in common at their homes, and asking questions to gather information about artifacts are appropriate ways to engage children in conversations about differences and similarities among people.

Family photographs that showcase out-of-school activities and experiences make wonderful long-term displays in the classroom. Individual photographs of relatives, family celebrations, team sports, church group activities, or favorite places can be passed around during sharing time and displayed on a designated wall inside the classroom. Teachers should update photo walls periodically to supplement instructional themes that support home-school cultural connections such as families, celebrations, communities, and healthy living. As children learn about these topics, teachers and children can refer to the photos on display and make important connections between their lives and the world in which they live.

Children's Literature Response Talks

Children's literature can also be an excellent catalyst for promoting culturally relevant dialogue that deals with similarities and differences among children. Teachers can facilitate conversations about book characters and the choices they make, as well as settings, events, photographs, and illustrations as they relate to children's personal experiences and family life. For example, teachers may use *One World, One Day*, Barbara Kerley's (2009) award-winning children's book containing photographs of children around the world as they engage in ordinary life, to invite students to talk about the photograph of a Chinese family having dinner together (pp. 26-27) and to share about their own family meal experiences.

Finding high quality literature written for young children is relatively easy with access to lists of award-winning books on the



Photo courtesy of Westminster School for Young Children, Nashville, TN

Need a little change for sharing time? How about bringing it outdoors?

Internet. For example, each year the National Council for the Social Studies, in association with the Children's Book Council, publishes a list of children's literature selected for its quality, attention to diversity, and appropriateness for K-12 audiences (see www.socialstudies.org). Lisa R. Bartle's Database of Award-Winning Children's Literature (see www.dawcl.com) is another useful tool for locating award-winning books appropriate for early childhood classrooms. The database allows users to search for books featuring specific topics, genres, and languages. See Table 1 for a list of suggested award-winning books and conversation starters for promoting culturally related conversations among young children.

[See Table 1 on following page]

Teaching Tips

The suggestions above are most effective with **teacher guidance**, **flexibility**, and **parent communication**. Teachers can guide sharing time by stating clear expectations for sharing, modeling how to share, and selecting a child with strong verbal skills to serve as a model for other children (Passe, 2006). Guidance also includes avoiding dominating the conversations or limiting child-to-child dialogue during sharing time. Children's sharing tends to become more complex and meaningful when they are allowed to talk freely in back and forth conversations (Murphy, 2003).

Table 1. Suggested award-winning children's literature for young children

Title, publication information, and award	Summary	Sample conversation starters for sharing time
Ada, A. F. (2002). <i>I Love Saturdays y domingos</i> . New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Winner, IRA Notable Book for a Global Society, 2003.	This is the story of a bilingual, bicultural girl who spends Saturdays with her English-speaking grandparents and Sundays (domingos) with her Spanish-speaking grandparents. She enjoys different foods and activities with each family.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is special about the people in your family? • How does your family celebrate birthdays?
Ajmera, M., Kinkade, S., & Pon, C. (2010). <i>Our Grandparents: A Global Album</i> . Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge. Winner, Notable Social Studies Trade Book Award, 2011.	This book is filled with photographs of grandparents and their grandchildren from around the world as they engage in various activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of activities do you and your grandparents enjoy together? • What special things do you do with other family members?
Jules, J. (2009). <i>Duck for Turkey Day</i> . Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co. Winner, Notable Social Studies Trade Book Award, 2010.	Tuyet is excited about celebrating Thanksgiving until she learns that her Vietnamese family will have duck instead of turkey for dinner. Later, she is relieved to learn that many of her classmates did not have turkey either. Diverse families celebrate the holiday with all sorts of different meals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What special foods do you eat at Thanksgiving? • What is your favorite special food?
Kerley, B. (2009). <i>One World, One Day</i> . Washington, D. C.: National Geographic. Winner, Notable Social Studies Trade Book Award, 2010.	This book is filled with photographs of children around the world as they go about daily life from morning until night. Activities like eating breakfast and going to school look different in other cultures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is happening in the picture of the Chinese family? Tell us about what dinnertime is like for you. • What kinds of things do the children in this book do after school? How do you spend your time after school?
Ogburn, J. K. (2011). <i>Little Treasures: Endearments from Around the World</i> . New York: Houghton Mifflin Books for Children. Winner, American Library Association award, 2012.	The author shares how parents from many cultures express their love for their children with various terms of endearment, such as “angelito” in Spanish.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your family show you that they care about you? • How do you show your family members that you love them?
Padmanabhan, M. (2011). <i>I Am Different! Can you Find Me?</i> Watertown, Mass.: Charlesbridge. Winner, Notable Social Studies Trade Book Award, 2012.	This book asks children to identify an object on each page that looks different from the others. The phrase “Can you find me?” is written in 16 languages throughout the book, and English words borrowed from other languages are featured.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes you special and different from your friends/classmates? • What special things do you notice about your friends/classmates?
Pinkney, Sandra L. (2000). <i>Shades of Black: A Celebration of Our Children</i> . New York: Scholastic. Winner, Carlotta Zolotow Award, 2001 and Skipping Stones Honor Award, 2001.	This book uses color photographs featuring African American children to explore the uniqueness of children's skin tone, hair, and eyes color.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let's take a careful look at everyone in our class. What similarities do we notice/how do we look the same? • What makes you look unique and special?

Flexibility is a key to successful sharing time. When sharing time activities become stale, routine, or uninteresting to children, a change may be in order (Gallas, 1994; Murphy, 2003). Simply changing the group size, time of day, topic, or format can spark new enthusiasm for sharing time. For example, when one classroom teacher noticed that her first graders had become bored with sharing time, she decided to have them tell sharing time stories for one month *without* using objects as they were accustomed to doing (Gallas, 1994). The results were very positive, and the children learned to talk about events in their lives in new ways.

Finally, communicating with parents and guardians about sharing time expectations and topics can lead to more meaningful sharing time conversations in class. Children are more likely to share and learn cultural lessons when everyone understands the purpose of sharing time. Furthermore, families can help children choose appropriate stories, artifacts, and photographs to share when they know about the topic and how their children will be asked to participate.

Conclusion

Fostering young children's healthy appreciation for cultural diversity requires early childhood teachers to be proactive by planning culturally relevant learning experiences and capitalizing on teachable moments as they arise. Getting started does not have to be difficult. Ask children to bring a family photograph to share with the class, or read a good book aloud and start a conversation with children about personal experiences that relate to the text, illustrations,

or photographs. These types of sharing time activities are excellent avenues for promoting meaningful learning about similarities and differences among children, both within a single classroom and in the world at large.

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