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READING #17 |

Cultural Influences on the Development of Self-Concept: Updating Our Thinking

Hermine H. Marshall

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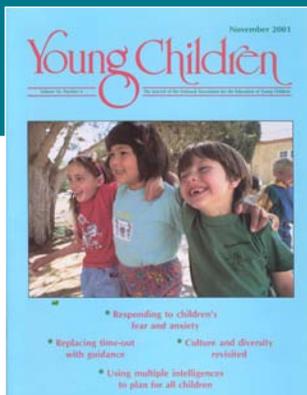
CATEGORIES:

Culture and Diversity
Early Childhood Professional

Cultural Influences on the Development of Self-Concept:
Updating Our Thinking

Hermine H. Marshall

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Why is it that some children try new things with enthusiasm and approach peers and adults with confidence, whereas other children seem to believe that they are incapable of succeeding in many situations? . . . What can we learn from research that will allow us to help children approach new situations and other people with confidence?

—H.H. Marshall,
"Research in Review. The Development of Self-Concept"

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Twelve years ago I assumed along with many early childhood educators that approaching new situations with confidence indicated a child's strong self-concept; hesitation and hanging back could indicate lack of self-esteem. In my review of research on the development of self-concept written at that time, the notion that children's behavior is influenced by their cultural background had only begun to enter the research literature and thinking of early childhood educators. I pointed out briefly that cultural values can affect self-esteem and different cultures may value and encourage different behaviors. For instance, taking personal control, important in dominant American culture, might not be valued in other cultures. Yet I indicated that autonomy and initiative are behaviors to look for as reflecting positive self-concept. I implied that children who lacked these traits might have low self-esteem.

The last decade has seen an increase in research on child development in different cultures. Awareness of this research has enhanced early childhood educators' sensitivity to how perspectives may vary in cultures that are different from the culture of individual educators as well as the dominant culture. Culture impacts not just which behaviors are valued and displayed but also our interpretations of these behaviors. As a result of this decade of research, it has become clear that what many of us have taken for evidence of self-esteem is influenced by our cultural perceptions. It is important, therefore, to revisit some of the issues related to self-concept development in light of a more sophisticated understanding of cultural influences. To this end, as educators we need to increase our awareness that our perceptions, actions, and interactions and those of children derive their meanings from the cultures in which they are embedded.

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Constructing a view of self: independent/interdependent

Children construct their views of self "by participating in interactions that caregivers structure according to cultural values about the nature of human existence" (Raeff 1997). In Western cultures, striving toward *independence* and individuality and asserting oneself are seen as important accomplishments (Markus & Kitayama 1991). As a consequence, Westerners perceive children who are outgoing and eagerly explore new situations as demonstrating competence and having a positive self-concept, especially compared to children who do not appear to seek out and actively participate in these situations.

In contrast, Eastern cultures place greater emphasis on maintaining harmonious, *interdependent* relationships. Markus and Kitayama (1991) note that interdependent views are also characteristic of many African, Latin American, and southern European cultures. (See also Greenfield 1994.) In cultures influenced by Confucian and Taoist philosophies, self-restraint and control of emotional expressiveness is considered an indication of social maturity (Chen et al. 1998). Asserting oneself may be seen as a sign of immaturity (Markus & Kitayama 1991). Children who are shy, reticent, and quiet are likely to be considered competent and well behaved by parents and teachers in the People's Republic of China (Chen et al. 1998; Rubin 1998). These children—whom North American teachers from the dominant culture might see as inhibited

and lacking in self-confidence— have a positive view of themselves and of their social relationships.

Similarly, in other cultures where interdependence or "relative enmeshment" (Garcia Coll 1990) are seen as ideal mature relationships, interdependency and interpersonal dependency are likely to be fostered between young children and their mothers. When asked about desirable child behavior, mothers from Latino cultures, such as Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican mothers, are

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likely to focus on respectfulness (*respecto*), a concept which assumes appropriate interrelatedness. In contrast the Anglo mothers in one study focused on autonomy and active exploration, reflecting more independent values (Harwood 1992). Moreover, some cultures such as traditional Navajo cultures expect children to observe before

attempting to try things (Bacon & Carter 1991). For these children too standing back and observing rather than exploring should not be taken as an indication of low self-esteem.

Nevertheless, although Chinese parents tend to value interdependence and cohesion and may minimize the development of individuality within the family, Taiwanese and immigrant Chinese parents seem to encourage independence so that children will be able to succeed in the larger society (Lin & Fu 1990). Likewise, some Mexican immigrant families may begin to approve of their children's independent thinking related to school topics as they become more acculturated (Delgado-Gaitan 1994).

In addition in Eastern cultures (Markus & Kitayama 1991) and Latino cultures (Parke & Buriel 1998), primary concern centers on other people and the self-in-relationship-to-other rather than self alone. Most people in these cultures value developing empathetic understanding and attention to the needs of others. These behaviors serve to maintain harmonious relationships more than would attending to meeting one's own needs.

These contrasts should not be taken to mean that independence and interdependence are mutually exclusive (Raeff 1997). Both indepen-

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dent and interdependent tendencies are common to human experience. People in Western cultures value relationships and cooperation as well as independence. "Every group selects a point on the independence/interdependence continuum as its cultural ideal" (Greenfield 1994, 4).

The impact on socialization and development

Varieties of both independence and interdependence affect socialization and development. Consequently we should be aware that how children see themselves in relationship to others is also a part of their self-concept. Educators need to expand their views of what is considered important to self-concept beyond the typical notions of autonomy, self-assertion, self-enhancement, and uniqueness and include characteristics such as empathy, sensitivity to others, modesty, cooperation, and caring as well.

Although it is important to be aware that our perceptions and interpretations of behavior are influenced by the culture(s) in which we were raised and in which we reside and that the meaning of behavior may vary for different cultures, we must be careful not to assume that just because children or families are from a specific ethnic or racial group that they necessarily share a common cultural experience. There

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are differences within cultures and within families. Other factors impinge on how children are raised and the meanings accorded to behavior, such as the family's countries of origin, the length of time immigrant families have been in the United States, the degree of acculturation the family has experienced, educational background, and social status (Delgado-Gaitan 1994; Killen 1997; McLloyd 1999).

Some children and families experience the influence of multiple cultures. This is particularly true when parents are from different ethnic, racial, or cultural groups. In these families parents may bring values from two or more cultures to their views and practices in raising children. Regardless of children's apparent ethnic or cultural background, it is important for teachers to be sensitive to *individual* children and family members and to how a family's beliefs, attitudes, and values may affect children's behavior.

Attempting to understand what each family values as important behaviors and watching for these behaviors may provide clues to the

meaning of children's actions for that family and child. It is important to recognize and affirm behaviors valued by the home culture. It is also essential to provide opportunities for children to learn behaviors that are valued by the Western culture (Delpit 1988). Children who are able to maintain comfort with behaviors that are valued in their home as well as those valued in the wider society may be most likely to have positive views of themselves in both cultural contexts.

What does this mean in practice?

My earlier research on self-concept development describes a number of ways to influence self-concept. These include helping children (1) feel they are of value, (2) believe they are competent, (3) have some control over tasks and actions, (4) learn interpersonal skills. Also noted as important is becoming aware of your expectations for children. The particular techniques for each of these recommendations remain valid today (see Marshall 1989).

Beyond these fundamentals, the following steps are based on a more sophisticated awareness of cultural and individual variations in values and behaviors. Using them as a guide will increase your sensitivity to the values and practices of the families whose children are in your care and enable you to support the development of positive self-concepts.

1. Be aware of the ways your own culture influences your expectations of children. Think about how you were raised, your family values. What behaviors were
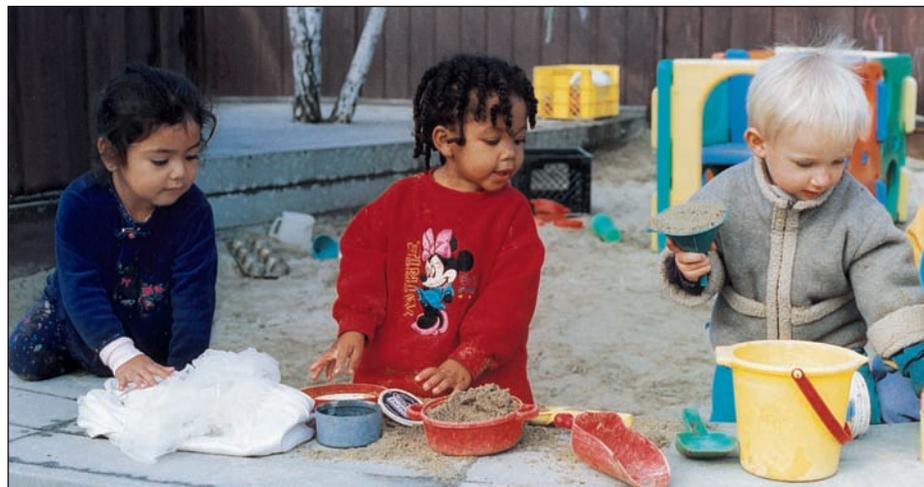
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encouraged? How did your family make you feel proud? Talk to friends or other teachers about their upbringing. Within your own community, there are likely variations in what families value and in the bases for positive self-concept. This reflection and knowledge may help you begin to expand your awareness of the indications of positive self-concept.

2. Consider the cultural backgrounds of the children in your setting and their community. Observe how children approach new tasks, relate to other people, and react to praise. This may raise some questions. Be a good listener. If you teach at the primary level, chat with the children before and after school or at lunchtime. Be careful that surface appearances do not influence your perceptions or interactions. Gather more information about the cultural and ethnic groups represented in your class (as noted below).

3. Learn about the cultures from which the children in your program or school may come. Read about the values and child rearing practices of these cultures. (See the "For further reading" list.) Talk to community leaders or people you know who have greater knowledge of these cultures.

Contact community-based organizations, such as the National Council of La Raza (NCLR). Inviting representatives of such organizations to talk to teachers in your setting may be helpful. Still, do not assume that this general information is sufficient. Further understanding of the cultural background of *particular* children in your class will be necessary since, in every cultural and ethnic group, individual and generational differences are likely.

4. Use your basic knowledge of the culture to talk with each family about its values and practices. Learn what families think is important to consider for their children. You might share with them what you have been learning about their culture or cultures. Explain that you recognize that every family is different and that you would like to know what they think and what they value as important. Asking about the families' methods for teaching and learning may be useful. Discuss what happens if children raise questions or explore on their own and how children and


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adults show respect. It is important to accept what family members say as valuable information to consider and avoid letting your own values and methods stifle communication.

5. Build on what you have learned from each family. Provide opportunities for children to learn in a variety of ways. For example, children might learn by observing first, trying things out on their own, or by doing tasks with a partner or group of peers. Children need opportunities to demonstrate caring and cooperation.

All children will benefit from enhanced opportunities to learn and

interact in a variety of ways. Enlarge your repertoire of responses; some children will find more comfort in nonverbal acceptance—a smile or nod—than praise. In all cases, showing respect for ways of interacting that derive from the home culture is critical to the support and development of a child's self-concept. Practices that are clearly harmful to the child, of course, should not be supported. In such a case, being able to discuss with the family why the practice is detrimental is important (see Gonzalez-Mena & Bhavnagri 2000).

6. Infuse the curriculum and classroom environment with a rich variety of materials from the cultures of your children as well as other cultures. Parents may be able to share songs or stories or bring in something special representing their home culture. Find books and posters that represent the children in your class. Introduce as snacks special treats from the children's cultures. Seeing their ethnic groups and cultures of origin valued will enhance children's self-concepts.

Conclusion

It is not enough to assume that affirming young children's assertiveness, confidence, and independence suffices to support self-concept development. Such qualities as showing respect for and being sensitive to others, learning by observing, and exhibiting humility may also evidence positive self-concept and should be nourished. Acknowledging the contributions and values of all the families whose children are in our care while also supporting children's development of necessary skills to succeed in mainstream America is most likely to enhance the development of children's self-esteem.
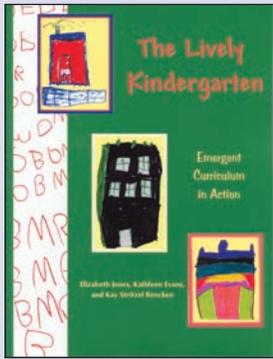
Building Cross-Cultural Relationships

Teaching children from a culture with which I had no prior experience, I consistently relied on the extended family to share responsibility for keeping the children safe and connected. Walking trips to the neighborhood park, where many urban evils could be found (but which, as I explained earlier, are part of the children's world), were made safe by the presence—at my invitation—of many of the culture's elders.

It must have been very hard for Iu Mien parents to drop their child in my room on the first day of kindergarten. Here was a teacher who didn't know the child's language, who didn't look like anybody they knew, except maybe a social worker. What in my voice, my face, my demeanor could reassure them that I would take the very best care of their most precious child? What in the room and the songs and stories could reassure the children that this would be a great place to be for three hours every day?

The Mien people have endured rudeness and inconsideration even to get as far as my door. There was often a lot of confusion about legal addresses, immunizations, custody, birth certificates—even about names. People at the registration table may have been loud and brusque—characteristics seldom seen in a Mien person in a public setting. A translator may or may not have been available. So when they arrived at my room, I tried my best to look reassuring. I invited parents to stay for a while if their child seemed unsure, and I connected them with parents I already knew from previous years. From the children's enthusiasm for this wonderful place set up just for them, most parents were able to hope it would be good.

Parents with a long family history of school success may not need the same reassurance. For nearly every parent, however, there is anxiety: Will the school be a good place for so precious a child? But higher anxiety must be the common immigrant experience, especially when there are language barriers. African Americans experience aspects of anxiety as well. Those viewed as outsiders by people in official roles have a hard time. Parents who have the confidence to be active advocates may articulate doubt about the reality of the school's commitment to teaching their children.

When we first introduced more developmentally appropriate practices at our school, teachers were afraid that parents would be unsupportive. But when parents saw children's enthusiasm—children who used to cry and cling on arrival now running in to join the others, children who used to be "sick" in the morning now bouncing up early to be sure to get to school, and children whose parents feared they would be bad now eagerly joining the group—their support flourished.

For me teaching in the Mien community has been a wonderful challenge. My previous experience had been mostly with children of European American and African American cultures with which I am very familiar. Mien culture was altogether new to me. But I found the Mien people forthcoming about sharing their cultural beliefs and practices, and I simply asked if I was unsure of something. On issues of death and funerals, it surprised me to learn that Mien people don't practice protracted grieving rituals because they believe that the longer you grieve, the more difficult you make it for the departed to go to the next world.

I would ask, observe, visit! I risked cultural blunders and noticed when I blundered. Whenever I was invited to weddings, birthday parties, cultural events, I'd go. I would step outside the school system to help families get mental health services, legal advice, and citizenship classes. In teaching adult literacy, I learned more and more about life in the refugee camps in Laos and Thailand.

I've learned that, as Bateson says, "Living in a society made up of different ethnic groups offers a paradigm for learning to participate without knowing all the rules and learning from the process without allowing the rough edges to create unbridgeable conflict" (1994, 153). Clearly I am going beyond the boundaries of the classroom in defining my obligations as a teacher. But I am very concerned that children get skills, and I cannot be an effective teacher of children unless I know what is meaningful and engaging to them. Skills learning can occur in the midst of any topic, theme, or activity; it must, however, be grounded in what is important to the learner.

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