

Research Fact Sheet

Children From “Underserved Minority” Backgrounds Have Strengths for Learning

Children’s learning is fundamentally based on their prior skills and knowledge, as educational institutions enhance and expand students’ skills. The background skills and knowledge that “underserved minority” students bring to school are assets that are often unnoticed, to the detriment of these students and others who could learn from them. Skill in collaboration, for example, is a strength of many Mexican-heritage and Central American children, and it is an important skill for learning and for contributing with which many middle-class European American children have difficulty. Attention to the skills and cultural resources of “underserved minority” students can support their learning and can enhance schools’ instructional approaches, to the benefit of all children.

Cultural strengths of underserved minorities are resources for learning.

- Latino, Native American, and African American children bring important strengths for learning. If these strengths were more widely recognized, schools could build on them to improve performance in school. For children to learn, it is important to build on the foundation provided by their prior knowledge and skills (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). In addition, these children’s strengths offer potential ideas and approaches for others to follow.
- Instead of replacing one set of skills or understanding with another, the approach should be additive (Valenzuela, 2012), so that children’s learning involves expansion of their possibilities. Everyone benefits from learning more than one way (Rogoff, 2003).
- A key area of strength in some “underserved minority” communities is skill in collaboration. Other areas include: attentiveness to surrounding events, skilled storytelling and narrative, metaphoric thinking, community-mindedness, helpfulness, perspective-taking and consideration, and systems thinking in science (Coppens et al., 2014; Heath, 1983; Medin & Bang, 2014; Rogoff, Correa-Chávez, & Silva, 2011; Silva et al., 2015).

Attention to strengths of underserved minorities is especially important given demographic changes. (See Hernandez, 2012.)

- Within a few years, by 2020, the majority (50.9%) of U.S. children under age 18 are projected to be of Black, Latino, American Indian, or Asian/Pacific Island backgrounds (according to the U.S. Census; Child Trends Databank, 2014).

Collaborative skills are an example of a strength of Mexican-heritage and Central American children. (See Alcalá et al., 2014; Knight et al., 1982; Mejía-Arauz et al., 2007; Orellana, 2001; Valdés, 2002.)

- Their collaboration is often very skillful, with fluidly and deeply shared thinking and decision making (López et al., 2012). This skill is especially common among children from families with Indigenous Mexican or Central American practices

(Chavajay & Rogoff, 2002; Ellis & Gauvain, 1992; Lorente Fernández, 2015). Children from families with extensive Western schooling (high school or more) often approach learning situations less collaboratively (López et al., 2012).

- Skilled collaboration seems also to be a strength in some other underserved communities, such as Native American (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Lamphere, 1977; Philips, 1983; Urrieta, 2015).
- In contrast, middle-class children tend to divide tasks up in ways that get in the way of learning from each other. They often separate the task into nonshared turns or boss each other or resist each other's efforts (López et al., 2012; Philips, 1983).

Collaboration matters, for children's learning and for work and family life.

- Collaboration is an important tool for learning (Barron, 2003; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Children learn as they try to reconcile conflicting idea when peers disagree or when more skilled partners guide children to focus on ideas that are just on the edge of their competence (Bransford et al., 1999; Piaget, 1926; Vygotsky, 1978).
- The National Research Council refers to collaboration as a 21st century skill that is necessary for children in today's economy (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013). Leaders of industry often call on schools to do a better job of helping children learn to collaborate. Collaboration is also important for getting along in families and communities.

Children need to learn how to collaborate.

- In classrooms and research that employ collaborative learning, many children have difficulty knowing *how* to collaborate (Barron, 2003; Roschelle & Teasley, 1995).
- Observations of common approaches among Mexican-heritage children and their families provide clues as to how skillful collaboration can be promoted among children from some other backgrounds, whose family and school lives may not have given them much experience with such skills.
 - For example, an important way to learn to collaborate appears to be pitching in together with others, attentively, to achieve a shared goal, with flexible leadership coming from whoever has a good idea at the time (Correa-Chávez et al., 2015; Rogoff et al., 2014).

It is important for children to learn to do things more than one way, and to learn what skills are relevant for which contexts. (See Hatano & Inagaki, 2000; Rogoff, 2003.)

- This is increasingly crucial as our country has become more multicultural and children of all backgrounds must navigate among contexts that use different skills and expectations.
 - For example, European American middle-class children need to learn the kind of collaboration that is needed in the 21st century as well as be skilled in individually focused skills that they are likely to have practiced at home since toddlerhood (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013; Rogoff, Mejía-Arauz, & Correa-Chávez, 2015).
 - And, Mexican-heritage children in the U.S. need to be skilled in the kind of collaboration that they are likely to have practiced at home since toddlerhood, as

well as in the kinds of individually focused activities that are common in schools (Rogoff, 2003).

- An important outcome for schooling is to support children in expanding their repertoires of practice (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003).
- A number of innovative schools foster collaboration as both a tool of learning and an important skill. In these schools, children and adults work together collaboratively in designing curriculum and learning together (González et al., 2005; Rogoff, Goodman Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001).

Schools themselves can and should learn from the children and the strengths they bring to school from home. (See Bransford et al., 1999; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988.)

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