

Raising Critical Consciousness and Building Community in an Undergraduate Child Development Course

Kaitlin Northey

University of Vermont

Teaching a Child Development course to undergraduate students at a four-year university forced me to reckon with the ways research, especially quantitative social science research, can reduce and essentialize complex identities into categories. Course content based on this research, if unexamined, can then propagate and endorse understandings of individual development that are oversimplified and may be inaccurate or reflect a deficit perspective. Prior to this course, most of my teaching experiences in higher education had been in methods courses, focused on helping students understand the practices and processes of teaching and building curriculum. As an educator in an early childhood teacher preparation program, I strive to learn about my students and celebrate the diverse identities they bring to class because I want to model the importance of building relationships and teaching the “whole” child. Research has demonstrated that even undergraduate students, especially those in high-enrollment courses, benefit from feeling known by their professors (e.g., Cooper et al., 2017).

In my methods courses, I engage my students in recognizing, unpacking, and working to address the biases they bring to teaching and we discuss the biases embedded in our educational systems and curricular materials. However, in 2019, when I was preparing to teach Child Development for the first time, I realized that teaching this course in alignment with my and the university’s commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice would require me to push back against my preconceived notions. I associated child development courses with large lecture halls, where the professor did not know the students, and there was a palpable sense of anxiety as students worked to memorize rather than understand content. I did not want to teach this type of course. Additionally, I wanted to help my undergraduate students develop an understanding

and appreciation for their own diverse and complex identities and experiences, which made it feel inappropriate and unacceptable to teach this content in the traditional way.

When determining the content I would teach, I considered multiple textbooks, and I selected one that mentions intersectionality and how societal systems disparately influence children's experiences and development (Crenshaw, 1989). The textbook also introduces students to research design, research ethics, and how to be a critical consumer of research. However, as is typical in this field of study, the content frequently isolates aspects of identity and uses research to make claims about children's growth, development, and abilities based on their gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Without additional resources and discussion, this presentation of content could reinforce concepts that I encourage students in my other courses to problematize and critically consider.

As a researcher and educator, it is my responsibility to help students become critical consumers of research to better understand its meaning and utility. As a class, we examine a few research articles the textbook references when supporting broad claims and students realize that the textbook's assertions do not always communicate the nuances present in the study's findings. Students also come to recognize that much of the child development research included in the textbook has been conducted using western perspectives and featured study participants who identified as white and middle class. We discuss that when researchers use aspects of identity (e.g., race) as variables and attributes internal to individuals, rather than as functions of social stratification and systemic oppression (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008), findings can limit our understanding concerning the myriad of factors that influence children's development.

As I embark on teaching Child Development for the fourth time to 60 undergraduate students this upcoming semester, I plan to implement and continue improving upon the following practices with the goal of intentionally building inclusive opportunities where students can consider child development through intersectional and interdisciplinary lenses.

- I carefully select the course textbook to reflect research on children's development from around the world and ensure it includes critical discussions about research.

- I assign supplemental resources and present summaries of research to broaden students' thinking about the weekly content to provide students access to additional information, more recent research, and different perspectives for discussion.
- After modeling how to notice, consider, and investigate a few of the textbook's claims to the whole class, I then encourage students to take on this type of engagement with course content going forward.
- I celebrate when students identify instances in the course materials or discussion where limiting beliefs about how children develop are made and I ask that they explain their thinking to the class.
- I utilize Universal Design for Learning principles in my courses to engage students and ensure they can access information and express their learning through a variety of means (CAST, 2018). Students come to class with a variety of strengths, needs, and comfort levels. I try to ensure all students can engage with course content, participate in activities, and express their understanding in rigorous and meaningful ways.
- I build relationships with my students to support what Germán (2021) refers to as "community-driven teaching," where I consider my positionality, my students, and our learning community (at the classroom level and more broadly) and reflect on how these factors influence our curriculum.
- I strive to intentionally create a class culture where we can unpack our biases and discuss the experiences and beliefs that have shaped our thinking and perceptions, especially as they relate to ideas about "typical" or "normal" trajectories of child development.
- I include frequent opportunities for students to communicate with each other individually, in small groups, and as a whole class during each class meeting. By reflecting on their own relationships to course content, the students' diverse identities and experiences allow all of us to learn from each other and consider new perspectives.
- The students, themselves, become important contributors of course content and use their experiences to make the scripted content relevant and meaningful to their lives.

As the semester goes on, students have more opportunities to work together to design evidence-based suggestions for promoting children's development and learning.

While Child Development courses are often spaces of rote learning and lecture, these practices reflect my ongoing commitment to increasing inclusion and intersectionality in my undergraduate Child Development course. I will continue to improve these practices and develop new approaches because I want to ensure that students feel known, respected, and experience a sense of belonging in our class community. I want course content and experiences to help students recognize and value their own diverse identities and the identities of others in strength-based and intersectional ways. By raising students' critical consciousness and building a community of learners, students can engage with and learn about children's development in deeper and more meaningful ways.

References

- CAST (2018). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2. Retrieved from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>
- Cooper, K. M., Haney, B., Krieg, A., & Brownell, S. E. (2017). What's in a name? The importance of students perceiving that an instructor knows their names in a high-enrollment biology classroom. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 16(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.16-08-0265>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1). <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
- Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (2008). *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.