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Teachers' Expectations About the Timing of Developmental Skills: A Cross-Cultural Study

Carolyn P. Edwards and Lella Gandini

Moving with her family to Massachusetts, a 4-year-old Italian enters the child care center one brisk autumn day. Wrapped in heavy wool coat, scarf, and hat, she stands limp and still as her mother carefully undresses her. And that is how she lets teachers dress and undress her every day thereafter. They begin to wonder why she doesn't try to help herself and whether she shouldn't be developing more self-reliance.

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Moving to Rome, Italy, a U.S. 4-year-old receives much friendly attention from adults. Though he

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knows Italian well, he often ignores people's greetings, and he never says thanks when offered small treats. People don't criticize, but it is clear they think his behavior unusual. At child care, too, he ignores courtesy, and eats food with his hands. His teachers enjoy this "straightforward American," but feel he needs to develop more mature behavior.

In both these cases, though they take place in different countries, teachers face problems that call upon training in multicultural education. Today, in the United States, teachers often need to understand what behaviors are normal in terms of children's cultural background. To understand children, teachers of course must have authentic respect for cultural diversity. But they also need something more: depth of knowledge about child development so they know what to expect of children of a given age. Teachers hold internal guidelines regarding many behaviors, but to what degree are they objective standards that can be applied to all children? How much, instead, do they reflect unconscious cultural biases?

In recent years, we have begun to find out more about people's different expectations for children. One useful approach to

studying cultural beliefs about childhood is to compare groups on what are called "developmental timetables." Timetables are expectations people hold about at what age children typically master various skills, such as sitting up, offering a toy, and using words. Adults who parent or work with children use these timetables as implicit guidelines to assess whether children are developing within normal limits.

Mothers' expectations for children's development are most influenced by cultural background

Most of the research has been done with mothers (Goodnow, 1985). Although one might think that mothers' timetables would be influenced by their own actual experience with children (for example, by the age or sex of their children) or by their educational level, in fact mothers' timetables are most influenced by cultural background. Mothers tend to show early expectations for skills stressed by their culture. For example, one group of San Francisco mothers had early timetables for verbal assertiveness and peer coping—versus late timetables for emotional control, courtesy, and obedience—compared to mothers from Tokyo, Japan (Hess, Kashiwagi, Azuma, Price, & Dickson, 1980). Exactly the same pressure for verbal and peer skills distinguished Australian mothers born in that country from Lebanese immigrant mothers (Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton, & Knight, 1984). Israeli mothers of European background have early expectations for infant cognitive development compared to Israeli mothers of African or Asian background (Ninio, 1979). Italian mothers living in a traditional city near Rome have late expectations for infant

crawling, self-feeding, and sitting unsupported—skills they seem to actively discourage—relative to a group of mothers from Boston, Massachusetts (New, 1984).

Thus, we have good evidence that mothers' developmental timetables are part of their cultural belief systems, what anthropologists call *folk wisdom*. This is not surprising. Culture influences all aspects of childrearing: not only *values* (goals for socialization) and *techniques* (practices of child-training), but also *beliefs* (underlying assumptions about the nature of the child and about the pace and stages of development) (Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

Yet, if developmental timetables are primarily shared folk wisdom, what role is left for learning of other kinds? For example, what about the role of experience—observing the development of children one knows? What about learning through reading or taking courses?

These questions become important when we remember that parents are not the only adults who socialize children. Today more and more young children spend time in the care of nonfamily adults. Are the developmental timetables of these trained caregivers, teachers, and other professionals also mostly a matter of folk wisdom? Hess, Price, Dickson, and Conroy (1981) found that their group of San Francisco Bay mothers believed in earlier maturity than did a comparison group of local preschool teachers, but no research has been done on the sources of teachers' beliefs. Surely culture influences teachers, but their training and direct experience should also shape their expectations about child development.

A cross-cultural comparison of teachers' developmental expectations

Our study looked at the developmental timetables of teachers from two cultural communities: Pistoia in central Italy and Amherst, Massachusetts. The test skills were drawn from a published reference, so we can find

out whose answers correspond most closely to the norms collected on North American children and drawn upon by the writers of child development textbooks on both continents. Certainly, childrearing values, techniques, and beliefs vary both *between* and *within* Italy and United States. The two study communities are parallel in being small, cohesive cities with extensive early education services. Further, within each community, we compared teachers working with two different age levels of children: infants (younger than 3 years) and preprimary children (ages 3 to 6).

We reasoned that if teachers' timetables are mostly folk wisdom, two consequences would follow.

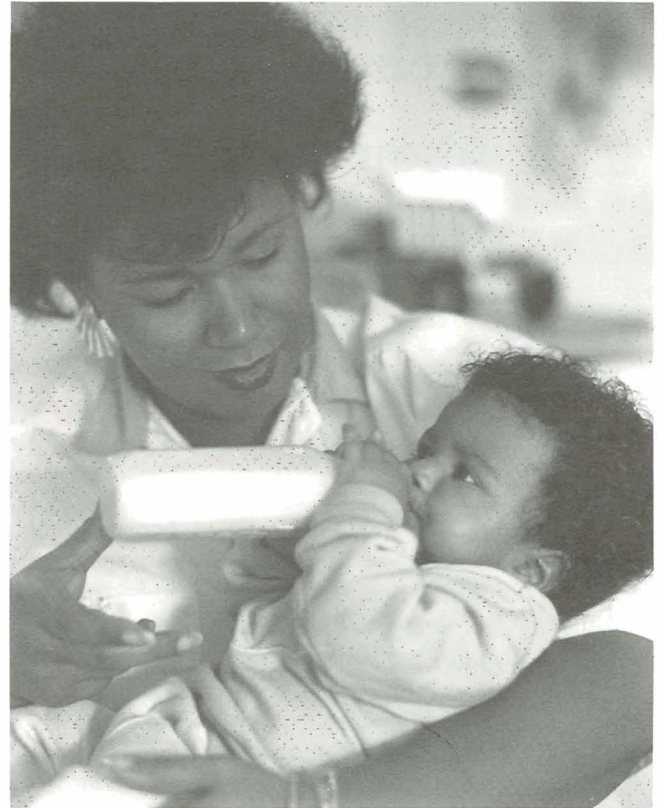
- **First**, the Amherst teachers' responses would match more closely the standards in the (Canadian) reference because they would derive from the same cultural system.

- **Second**, the pattern of responses of infant and preprimary teachers *within* each community would be similar; but strong differences would be found *between* Pistoia and Amherst.

Samples and settings

One hundred thirty two teachers (66 from each city) were recruited from in-service training courses.

Anthropology teaches us to study culture by looking at *communities* where people share a



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Teachers hold internal guidelines regarding many behaviors, but to what degree are they objective standards that can be applied to all children? How much, instead, do the guidelines reflect unconscious cultural biases?

group identity, practices, values, and beliefs. Then, childrearing differences can be related to everyday life: work roles of mothers and fathers, family patterns, housing and living arrangements (Whiting & Edwards, 1988). We do not assume that the cultural patterns of a community generalize to the whole society. In both the United States and Italy, subcultures have arisen based on social class, ethnic, and regional variations.

Amherst is a college town of about 35,000 people in rural western Massachusetts. Founded in 1755, it has a long liberal tradition and town-meeting style of self-government. Nowadays there are many varieties of private and employer-supported child care and mainstreamed preschool and kindergarten programs in all the public elementary schools. A town-funded Children's Services Department includes resource and referral services. People in the town place a high value on education, and most Amherst infant and preprimary teachers have B.A. degrees in early childhood or elementary education. Many of them take graduate courses in education at the local state university.

Pistoia is an ancient city near Florence in Tuscany, dating from Roman times. With 100,000 people, it is a provincial capital, and an agricultural and industrial center. Progressive local administrations have placed a priority on early education. There is a respected system of publicly financed child care centers fulfilling the demand for infant (0-3) and preprimary (3-6) care and education, along with extensive in-service training for all teachers.

Method

We designed a questionnaire in English and Italian to assess teachers' timetables on self-help,

social, and cognitive skills. Some of the items were newly created, but 44 of the 60 were taken (slightly revised) from a developmental assessment and performance analysis published in Canada (Vulpe, 1977). In this report, we focus on those 44 skills, for which we have the norms for children's typical age of attainment. We selected these items from two sections of the Vulpe Scales: Activities of Daily Living (Feeding, Dressing, Hygiene, Social Interaction), and Cognitive Processes and Specific Concepts. The items were chosen to balance infant-toddler and preprimary level skills.

Sample items

At what age can you expect a child to begin to:

(Choices: 6 months, 9 months, 1 year, 18 months, 2 years, 2.5 years, 3 years, 3.5 years, 4 years, 5 years, 6 years, over 6).

Sample self-help items:

- 1 _____ hold own bottle when feeding
- 2 _____ use cup without supervision
- 3 _____ cut with knife
- 4 _____ use fingers for eating dry food or pieces of meat/vegetables

Sample social items:

- 1 _____ interact affectionately with familiar person by hugging or patting
- 2 _____ share toys with another child
- 3 _____ greet people entering the room without need for adult prompting or cue

Sample cognitive items:

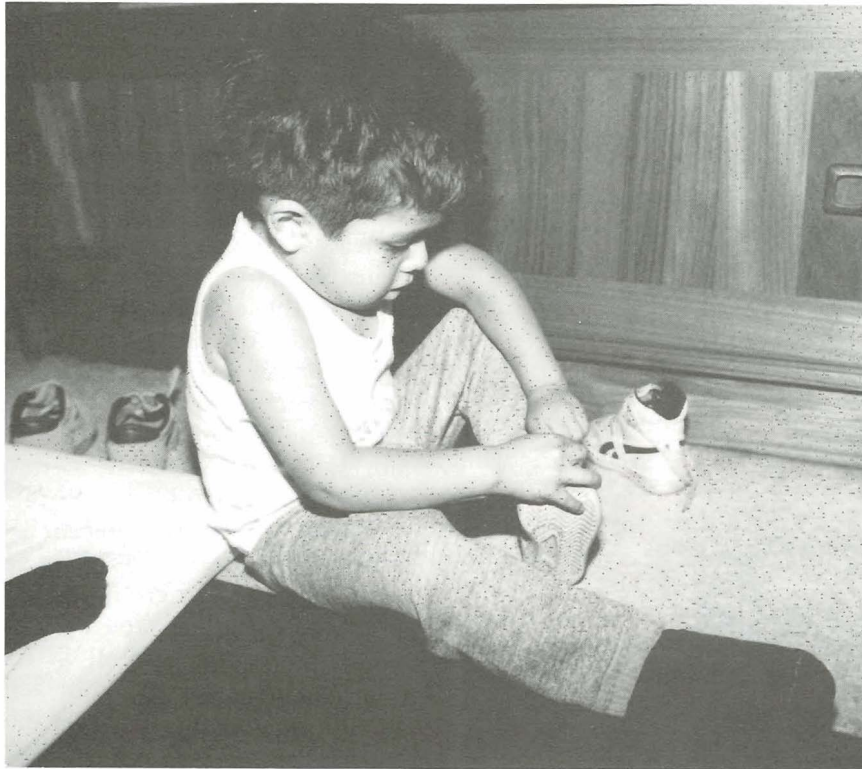
- 1 _____ use size words such as *big* and *little* correctly
- 2 _____ count to 10
- 3 _____ tell a familiar story all the way through, from memory with no help

Findings

To compare the teachers to one another and to the published norms, we calculated the average ages given by each group for each skill. The teachers had been able to answer almost all of the questions, leaving only two percent of items blank.

Using these average ages, we compared how the four groups generally saw the set of skills. Did all the groups put the skills in the same general sequence—with certain skills coming early, certain skills coming late—or did they produce completely different sequences of expectations? The sequences of the four groups looked very similar indeed (the Pearson intracorrelations were all in the 90s). These findings do not support the notion that Pistoia and Amherst teachers' expectations were drawn from two separate pools of cultural folk wisdom. In fact, these groups of teachers looked more like each other than had the groups of mothers from different cultures previously studied by Hess and Goodnow and their colleagues.

A second question was how the Amherst versus Pistoia teachers compared to the standard norms published in the Vulpe reference. Again using the average answers of each group, we tested whether the Amherst groups produced sequences more like the standard norms than did the Pistoia groups. The answer was no. The Pistoia infant and preprimary teachers produced sequences that compared as well (correlated as highly, .79 or above) with the standard norms as did the Amherst groups. These findings, like those above, indicate that the Amherst and Pistoia teachers drew upon the same general body of knowledge when they answered the questionnaire, not two separate pools of cultural folk wisdom.



There is a North American emphasis on individual autonomy, for instance, and an Italian emphasis on family solidarity.

Does this mean that there were no community differences between the teachers in this study, or no differences between infant and preprimary teachers? Certainly not. To get a more accurate and detailed look at this question, we compare the teacher groups in terms of how they responded to each of the 44 items taken one at a time, to see if the groups gave significantly different average ages for each skill. We found that, on almost half the items, the Amherst and Pistoia teachers had different average scores. For example, for the item *cuts with knife*, the Amherst teachers gave an average answer of 4 years, while the Pistoia average was a whole year higher at 5 years 2 months. The Amherst teachers tended to have earlier expectations on dressing skills, social skills with peers, and number concepts. In contrast, the Pistoia teachers tended to expect earlier

hygiene and toileting competence, social skills with adults, and cause-effect concepts. Thus, while the teachers from the two cities tended to put the skills in the same general sequence from early to late, they gave different ages for many of the individual items.

Results regarding teaching level are also interesting. On more than half the items, we found significant differences between infant and preprimary teachers. Usually, it was the infant teachers who put the younger ages, as if they saw

the whole timetable of development as happening earlier. For example, on the cognitive item *sings a simple song or rhyme from memory*, the infant teachers gave an average answer of 2 years 4 months, while the preprimary teachers gave a later expected age of 2 years 8 months. Infant teachers were more "accurate" to the Vulpe standards on infant-toddler items, preprimary teachers on preprimary items. These findings highlight how direct contact and experience help from teachers' developmental expectations.

These findings are limited to two communities—two particular samples of teachers. We would not want to generalize from our findings to other Italian and American teachers. The two countries, of course, have very different histories and heritages, with Italy (especially the northern regions) providing much more public infant and preprimary care than the United States. The two cities, Amherst and Pistoia, are similar in the priority that local people place on education for both young children and their teachers.

Teachers' developmental expectations in these two cities are influenced by cultural community, but also by other factors—training and contact with children, we believe. This study is the first to demonstrate that experience—in this case, working with a certain age group of children—influences adults' expectations. Certainly, the early childhood settings them-

Teachers' expectations about normal developmental timetables vary in relation to the cultures they come from, as well as in relation to child development training and experience with children.

selves in Amherst and Pistoia, as well as teacher behaviors, are visibly different in ways that reflect overarching societal values. There is a North American emphasis on individual autonomy, for instance, and an Italian emphasis on family solidarity (Lambert, Hamers & Frasure-Smith, 1979). Nevertheless, despite the group differences in childrearing values and practices, these teachers seem to have constructed developmental expectations that are different in particulars but convergent in overall sequence for emerging skills.

Practical implications

What are the practical implications? So much change takes place in children during the preprimary years that quality preparation for work with young children has always involved a strong element of developmental psychology. Teachers cannot operate appropriately without guidelines for knowing what to expect of children of a given age. Yet we think teachers would like to know more about cultural and subcultural differences in expectations for children, so that they can re-examine their expectations and understand children from different backgrounds. Research on expectations can be a source of useful knowledge for teachers—causing them not to doubt their whole framework of knowledge, but rather to know what are special areas of emphasis in particular cultures and subcultures—what competencies children are pressed to master. Good teachers, we have found, usually hold an attitude of respect for diversity. What they might most like is more concrete information about how culture and community influence children's development.

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Caregivers' Corner



A backsaving idea! Let each toddler have a treat when it's diaper changing time! Invite the child to climb up to the changing table herself!