

Credit: **Developing cultural capital in your primary school** Melanie Moore's blog 09/11/2022

Cultural Capital – What is it and what is about it that helps children succeed against the odds?

Cultural capital has become an increasingly familiar phrase concerning the curriculum. Here's a simple look at the theory of cultural capital and how you can easily embed it within your curriculum.

The meaning of culture

Culture comes in many different forms: a cultured person, a cultural icon or the culture of a school or a society. In its totality, the word 'culture' refers to the behaviours of a society that form a way of life; the way we speak, the traditions we have and the knowledge and beliefs that are communicated or passed down from one generation to another.

What is cultural capital?

Coined by French sociologist [Pierre Bourdieu](#), the concept of [cultural capital](#) builds on the ideas of [Karl Marx](#) to define factors other than economic wealth that influence a child's educational success. Bourdieu believed that these factors included knowledge, life experiences, language, behaviours, tastes and habits, which pass through the family over many generations.

Who has cultural capital?

Bourdieu said that the middle classes had the most cultural capital, while the lower or working classes had less. Cultural capital, habits, behaviours, and so on were passed down through the family, thus perpetuating the division between the different classes.

In more recent research, [The Sutton Trust's Parent Power 2018 report](#) provides evidence that even today, middle-class children have more cultural capital than their less advantaged peers. Consequently, the children of middle-class families are still much more likely to succeed at school, have a university education and succeed in their adult life. With all the tremendous efforts of schools to redress the balance of such inequalities, it remains frustrating that this is the case.

How will your children benefit from good cultural capital?

Research evidence indicates that children will find life more challenging without adequate cultural capital, from everyday social interactions to future job interviews.

The better language, social skills and knowledge a child has when entering the school system, the better they can fit into the school habitus. On the other hand, if children come to school with a poorer vocabulary, less knowledge, limited experiences and a poorer understanding of how to behave in the school setting, they are already at a disadvantage compared to their peers.

Therefore, for many, helping all children to develop their cultural capital is a matter of equality and social justice.

The role of your school

While Bourdieu acknowledged that the family primarily influences a child's cultural capital, he also acknowledged that schools are essential in filling the gaps they might have in their cultural capital. Therefore, the schools' role is to provide all children with the knowledge, experiences, language and social skills they need to have the best chances possible. With the widening of social and economic

circumstances today, schools have never been more critical in filling the gaps that some children have in their cultural capital.

What does Ofsted say about cultural capital?

For the inspectorate, cultural capital is defined as the acquisition of knowledge.

‘It is the [essential knowledge](#) that pupils need to be educated citizens, introducing them to the best that has been thought and said, and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement’

School inspection update, January 2019 | Special edition

And while we know that knowledge is important, this definition certainly misses the point: true cultural capital is much a broader being than simply knowledge. The problem is, if we as primary teachers only focus on teaching children knowledge, we are in danger of narrowing the curriculum and excluding many other essential aspects that make a well-rounded child.

I have yet to meet anyone in the primary sector who wants their school to become a knowledge factory. This approach would create a complete disengagement for many children, turning them off from an education they cannot access. It would result in an education failing to recognise their needs and potential.

5 examples of embedding cultural capital into your curriculum

To avoid perpetuating any disadvantages a child may have, we must look to the [curriculum](#) we offer them. You can do this in many ways, but here are five suggestions to get you started.

1. Know your community well

All children and all communities have cultural capital. Knowing the children you teach and the community they live in well will help you tailor your curriculum to meet their needs better. Developing good relationships with [parents](#) and the community will make for valuable relationships where ideas, traditions and needs can be shared and acted upon. Using information-finding surveys, cultural ideas workshops, or simply finding time to talk to parents at the start or end of the day can provide great insight into all your children’s cultural needs and potential. When you know where the gaps are, you are in a much better position to tailor your curriculum to meet them.

2. Teach more than just knowledge

Cultural capital is more than just knowledge, regardless of the inspectorate’s definition. As primary practitioners, we know the value of all the other aspects of actual cultural capital. Good teachers know that primary children need so much more than just knowledge; they need conversation, play, first-hand experiences and understanding.

So, while it is essential to be truly clear about the [knowledge](#) you teach in the curriculum, as part of each subject discipline, you should also ensure that your curriculum allows children to use and apply it in various cultural and social contexts.

To do this, you will need to ensure that the [projects](#) and [lessons you plan](#) as part of your curriculum allow time for children to use their knowledge to debate, investigate, present and problem-solve. What we do with knowledge and how we acquire and use it are just as important as what we know. Professor Michael Young writes an excellent article [What we’ve got wrong about knowledge and curriculum \(TES, 2002\)](#) that provides a fascinating insight into his thoughts on knowledge.

3. Make time for talking

A good grasp of spoken language and a varied vocabulary are one of children's most valuable social skills. In fact, children who read more and have a more extensive vocabulary typically do better in the long term in their education. It is also important to remember that being a successful citizen is not just about knowing things; it is also about being able to mix and talk to others, socialise in diverse groups and present yourself well.

Therefore, ensure that your curriculum includes and makes explicit the social and technical [vocabulary](#) for all subjects. Moreover, ensure that children have plenty of time for quality talk in lessons and activities. Encourage debate, group and paired discussion and plenty of opportunities for questioning. Conversations with adults are also meaningful, and it is well worth establishing a practice of 'time to talk' throughout the whole school.

4. Embed a variety of cultural experiences

Cultural capital exists in every community, both in the people that live there and the built and social environment. Including the study of places, spaces, monuments and historical buildings within your curriculum will help you embed cultural experiences into the curriculum and provide [local knowledge](#) and contexts to topics and projects.

Cultural diversity is the existence of several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society. You can learn so much from people with different backgrounds, cultures and religions.

You should also aim to include other cultural experiences within your curriculum. This might include visits to the local museum, theatre or library. The local library and museums will often offer many brilliant cultural experiences free of charge to primary schools.

5. Quality resources

Cultural capital means ensuring all children have the same opportunities in life. It is about opening new worlds and helping them learn about the wider world. So, while your curriculum needs to be well-planned, broad, and rich, it is also crucial that the resources you use to teach it are the absolute best that you can get.

If we want children to understand complex concepts, appreciate beauty and learn about great and [ancient civilisations](#), then the images we use to show them must be accurate, compelling and awe-inspiring. When ad-hoc or poor-quality resources are used to teach the curriculum, we take away those opportunities from children. Invest in beautiful books, use the local library, buy the best practical materials, and use film and photography rather than cheaply produced, print-based resources found online. A [quality curriculum](#) can only be realised when the quality of the resources is equally as good.

Summary

As primary educators, we can enrich and improve the lives of some of the most disadvantaged children through the things that we teach them and the experiences we offer.

While this blog offers some simple starting points for your consideration, it is important to remember that an excellent primary school and nurturing, attentive teacher already does many things to help children develop their cultural capital. By further integrating components of cultural capital into the curriculum, we can be powerful agents for change and help transform the life chances of even the most disadvantaged of children.

Suggestions ... for schools and parents/guardians: read more about cultural capital and embed it in the lives of the children by at the very least teaching them that it exists.