

Mike: Nick, did I ever tell you about my first interaction at Hilltop?

Nick: Was it when you first meet me, Mike? hahahaha

Mike: You're a fool. Haha. I had just finished my road trip across the country like 12 hours prior. It was dead of winter, I had loaded up my honda civic, great gas mileage if yall are looking for a car out there, had one bag, a suit or two, mixed my pre-workout with some coffee, and lemme tell you, that was a bad idea, and spent just over a week driving across the country. Saw some wonderful sights.

Anyways, it was my first day. I walked in and was like what the hell did I get myself into. I had worked in childcare settings. Worked on one on a college campus. Worked in a family child care home. So coming to a center was a bit different. Plus, Hilltop is a Reggio-inspired center and I wasn't familiar with the approach. As I walked down the halls, I saw children writing on walls which made me cringe. I saw children painting on themselves which made me freeze up. I saw children pouring their own milk. I was like wtf. I remember thinking, my mom, my educators would have had a heart attack here!

Nick: I think you're not the only one! Especially walking into Hilltop for the first time! Or my class, eerrr former class, Raindrop Room. And I know the face too well!

Then I remember coming across a child who was standing in the doorway and was like "who are you?" and I was like "my name is Mike, who are you?" and she was like "oh my name is such and such." I then said "oh my what a pretty name. And aren't you just a cutie pie." The educator immediately said "oh we don't say that here" and the child was like "yeah, and I'm also intelligent, articulate, and cool" and she marched away.

Nick: Yeah, Mike, and as someone who helped architect that aspect of our culture by conversing with new people, reiterating the message to the current staff, I'm glad you were taken back by it! And you (gender language, ownership piece, people coming before you)

What we say with our words and body, the inflection in our voice has a strong impact on children's development. Like everything we do, it's modeling. How we talk with children becomes their inner voice...

Mike: We done one at night, one on the weekend, one on race, one while... sipping on some whiskey. But of all the Napcasts we have done, this one makes me a little nervous.

This one we're doing live. A live recording. No chance to edit out the curse words, no chance to rerecord when my email notifications starts going off. This is it. And we got what? 60-70 people on with us listening in. This is kinda cool.

Nick: Wait, What?! You didn't tell me this was live.....

Mike: Welcome to Napcast, a podcast produced by Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle, Washington, on the traditional lands of the first people of Seattle, the Duwamish People. For

the people on with us right now, you're getting to put a name to this lovely face. A face that hasn't shaved or got their locs twisted in about 7 months. I'm your Afro-Caribbean, co-host Mike Browne, my pronouns are he/him

Nick: Hello everyone out there in WAEYC Zoom world! We're happy to have you with us! I am your other co-host, Nick Terrones. I can't grow facial hair very well, but I did have a mullet up until a few weeks ago. I will say though it was very becoming of my Native and Mexican American heritage. Pronouns he/him.

Mike: Our people come from a long line of beautiful long hair, and a long line of natural storytellers. And our stories are so much more than just an avenue to educate. It's a way we help empower one another, to engage, find meaning, to move us to be more empathetic and generous, to give us strength. Stories for our people is how we have survived. I did an interview with Natasha from childhoodyears.org and we talked about how we can preserve culture through education and language is one of those cultural pieces we can uphold and strengthen and use as a source of strength. So, I want to focus our talk today on language. The language we use or don't use with children, families, and with each other.

Nick: I was happy that you wanted to dive into this topic with me when we were thinking about what to talk about. Language has always been fascinating to me, especially this language we speak: English. It's kind of a lot of nonsense and only speaking for myself it has forever encouraged me to contemplate why we say the things we do, to whom (who, whom?) we say it to, and why we accept some things and not others.

Now bring that lens and focus to our work, it is even more apparent that we strive to be cognizant of our word choices, to essentially watch our language!

Mike: And how we absorb language is kinda neat too. You remember the character Osmosis Jones? Cool. This question has nothing to do with that character. I was just trying to figure out a way to use the word osmosis. But in all seriousness, language is something we absorb through osmosis. We don't really think about it. And I think because we don't think about it, we often take it for granted. And that's where I want to start. The language we absorb. Talk to me about your growth around your use of language. Talk about it all – growing up in a dual language household, your rejection of it, any cool ways you were exposed to vocabulary, and also, can you recall how language and the construction of meaning in our social world affected you growing up?

Nick: Well it was only my mom who spoke Spanish, and she definitely did her best to get me to know it. But growing up in 90's LA, speaking Spanish wasn't exactly a desired trait. I guess in kindergarten I was placed in ESL for a bit and when my mom asked me how school was going, I said it was easy and I was helping all the other children. My mom looked into it further and turns out I was basically put there because of my last name. It was probably too Mexican than something more common. Like I'm sure the school gave the benefit of the doubt to my friend Scotty Gomez. I can't recall it, probably not like my mom, the rejection of my family's language, but I tell you now I regret it...even if I was just 5 or 6. I wrote in a blog last year that throughout my childhood I was so admit that I as Native American more than Mexican. I

did all I could to try and distance myself from what was being looked at as the other, the problem of the time. Essentially I saw speaking Spanish as a detriment, a social liability.

Mike: Growing up, my mom was the ultimate hustler and she had jobs as a nurse tech, worked at Builder's Square which was like a Home Depot, she was a project manager, she had her own childcare center like we talked about in Episode 8 "I get it from my mama," she was a substitute Kindergarten teacher, she taught French, which is her first language.

So, hearing how you didn't want to speak Spanish growing up kinda hits home. Not many know this but French was the first language I spoke. And it could have stuck with me had it not been for one interaction my mom had with my educator.

The childcare I was in kept telling my mom that I had a developmental delay and that I was in desperate need of speech therapy if I had any chance to succeed. Spoiler alert, I didn't have one. Learning two languages at once just had me processing a little bit slower than my peers.

But from my mom's perspective, she's like damn, not only are we immigrants, but we're Black, we're in poverty, life already is stacked against us. So, she was like lemme switch it up and only speak English to him. She stopped speaking French to me in hopes I can learn English quicker. Could you imagine me with these locs, this smile, the ability to change a diaper, and knowing French, English, and Spanish.

Nick: You'd be one heluva of a European au pair!

But just hearing what you're saying got me thinking about the power of language. And how this world can be represented in an unlimited number of ways.

You and I represent such non-traditional, non-westernized ways. And I don't know about you but I'm not gonna lie, I'm feeling a bit robbed. Robbed of part of my culture because of what an educator told my mom. How she weaponized language against her. And a couple of weeks ago, I was triggered when this topic came up at work.

Nick: Ooooooo, I'm intrigued! What's the tea, my brother? What happened?

Mike: We were going through our 30 hour basic training the other day and honestly, I got pissed off half way through. We were talking about using a framework to see if a child might need additional outside developmental support. And we were talking about how could we suggest to parents that their child might need to see a specialist or a therapist. And the reason I got upset is for a multiple of reasons.

First of all, we were operating with a ton of assumptions here. We are assuming all children and families are well off enough to hire an occupational therapist.

Secondly, we're operating from a white culture. When I talk about white culture – I'm referring to the way we act, behave, think, know, and do. And when you're an organization like ours that is serving predominantly white affluent communities and you're using a framework that is

white as hell, and you're operating from a white lens, and you finally have a child of color in your care, but you're using and operating from this white culture, you're setting that child up for failure or for additional hardships in life.

Nick: I believe there is potential in that to be a possibility, sure. What about factors to mitigate such impacts? Playing the role of a critical friend here, wont there be many other factors that provide the hardships that are far more detrimental than well-intended, researched-based practices?

For a second, I thought you were going to break out in song "You got a friend in me" from Toy Story.

I appreciate the critical friend part. There are other factors of course. But as I sat there listening, I was seeing parallels to my own experience.

Because like I just said, I was referred to a speech therapist and was referred to an occupational therapist. My white educators were concerned that I had attachment issues. Luckily, I had some from the community who was also an educator and stepped in and was like "this child doesn't have any issues. He just knows it's disrespect in our culture to make eye contact for prolonged periods of time with authority figures."

And that's where I'm getting on with this next thought. It's not just the language we speak verbally or non verbally that can be detrimental. It's the language we absorb and the language that informs our ways of being as an educator which can also be harmful. So, how do we break this cycle?

Nick: We talked about this a while ago on our own time, and this was one of the talking points that got me excited about this language aspect, specifically when it comes to this idea of assessment.

The first thing I want to point out is that our current societal social-emotional landscape is setting roots into the ability to process and access information extremely fast. Pair that with development in technology and we have all the fixings to solve problems quickly, at least the desire to do so. We have curated a can-fix-it kind of culture.

Secondly, among many of the information based aspects of our lives, we have it readily accessible to our practice and learning in ECE. What is "it"? Research-based practices. I'll rattle off some names and maybe in the chat box everyone can type a Y or N if yes you have heard these names or no you haven't: Jean Piaget. Erik Erikson. Urie Bronfrenbrenner. Lev Vygotsky. John Bowlby.

I'll stop there, but could go on. And what do all these people have in common:

Mike: Names only you can pronounce?

Nick: They're all white men!

Calling this out isn't to diminish their work and contributions, but to get us to think about the sort of standard of what is "developmentally aligned." Essentially this is that white lens, the white center cultural practice in which many "high quality" centers base approaches from that you were talking to...I think. And so, now what? So what about that observation? Well acknowledging it in our centers, our best-practices approaches, our researched based curriculums, and recognize and actively seek out other forms of gathering information on children. These best intentions and practices, inevitably hit a wall; where best intentions become lopsided by "expert opinions and perspectives." And I believe for while, these well-meaning intentions have been pressured by society: a society centered in whiteness.

The third thing I want to touch on is the gender aspect. In a random national sample of over 4,000 state funded preschools, boys were 4 times as likely to be expelled from preschool than girls. EXPELLED Mike!!! Expelled from preschool! When I hear about expulsions and suspensions in PRESCHOOL I often think about how, I know this may sound cold, how inept an educator must be or how inadequate a center is! Your job is to help a child navigate their feelings, to understand where they're coming from, because behaviors are a reflection of a need. Hold, I don't want to get too worked up, and I know I'm generalizing, there are many slices to the pie, I know....but if that little research is an indicator of anything, is the lack of understanding in physiological development, and when you connect that to a cultural context we often end up seeing boys being put into a deficit framework and expectations.

Mike: That goes back to this conference I'm putting on called the Learning Stories Conference here in Seattle in June 2021. The theme I decided was "The System Wasn't Built for Us." I was super intentional in picking those words because I wanted to remind people that the educational system isn't failing BIPOC, that's Black, Indigenous, People of Color, because it was never meant to include BIPOC people to begin with.

So when I say "The System Wasn't Built for Us" I mean, we need to go about this business of childcare in November 2020 and beyond with the mentality that we need to abolish and start anew. Last week you and I were in a training that I organized through our Educator Discussion Series and the training was on "Trauma Responsive Leaders and Organizations." The facilitator, Victoria, said something that really stuck with me.

It was something like "if your organization hasn't updated your values in the last 5 years then you need to. The values you created were specific to the people in that building. Meant for the children you served at that time. Many of them have moved on. Those values might not resonate or be as important to the new group of leaders in your organizations."

Nick: I remember that, and that has stuck with me as well. It is important that socially-gearred organizations, like schools, run diagnostics checks on themselves. In a different episode I'll talk about the diagnostics check a bit more. But, this check and balance practices should and must include ALL members of the organizational-community, like families and children.

And that can totally be applied here to the different assessments and frameworks we have. I urge everyone to go and ask questions like

“when’s the last time our assessments, frameworks, observation tools etc. were updated?”

“were they updated and adapted to meet the various cultural needs of the children we serve now?”

“What data do we have that supports the fact that these tools we use are effective with children of color?”

I’m agitator man. I like asking these questions. I like going deep. I like stirring up trouble. But like the late John Lewis said, “get in good trouble, necessary trouble” and questioning a system, a protocol, or your leadership team who are upholding said systems, is necessary.

Nick: And we must ask our families and caregivers in our organizations to contribute to such assessment frameworks. Finding out what language makes sense to them. Are the questions we ask and observations we make going to make sense within a cultural context? The language we use with them is super important. Just thinking about both of our parents, how my mom tried to impart Spanish with me, and how yours were immigrants, I feel like there’s a lesson that can be learned right there around communicating with parents and carving out context that feel culturally responsive. So, how do you think we can effectively communicate with families who might be reluctant around sending the child to a therapist? Or how could we early childhood people provide context that makes sense?

Mike: First of all, if you couldn’t tell, I’m super against labelling children. Labelling them as ADHD or special or whatever. And I give it up to Hilltop because they really helped form my thinking around staying clear from quote, unquote positive labels such as princess or beautiful because labels stick with children like wet cement.

Nick: Thank you, Mike! And I am happy to have helped a little!

Any good thing that happens and you take credit... damn, I taught you well haha.

Couple weeks back, we had one child who one day didn’t want to say good morning to me and her father called her shy. Every day since then, she has repeated that pattern and says “I’m shy” and it takes me forever to welcome her inside the building. We basically confined this child who is a delight, full of energy, to this particular behavior and role.

Nick: Or when “cute” behavior does not fly with an adult outside of the child’s immediate circle, the child is implored to explore other tactics. And sometimes these labels gives children an out, like being shy to not have to interact.

Precisely.

So as I attempt to make a connection between that tangent I just went on and your question, I’m going to double down and say again, when you’re looking to support families and disclose that you believe they need to be referred, take a step back and be like “let’s take an even

closer look at the assessment model we are using” before we label this child and apply a deficit narrative to them.

Yes, I totally understand that you have to obtain crucial information about the child's developmental progress and you have to balance that with the values that the families have. Bypassing or glossing over family cultures is not only you disregarding the families as the experts of their child, but you're possibly working to increase the opportunity gap for children of color.

I'm not sure if there are any Kindergarten aged teachers out there listening right now, but the other day I heard someone say “what children normally learned at preschool” and it blew my mind because once again, you're just assuming all children went to preschool. Preschool is expensive as hell. And also not required. A child might not have had a group care experience which is why they might be exhibiting certain tendencies or might find sharing or regulating themselves in group care as difficult.

But in terms of how do we communicate with families who might be reluctant? It's our jobs as ECE professionals, that we meet them where they are. And there are multiple things you need to consider when you're communicating with them. When I'm in the presence of BIPOC elders, I'm constantly thinking of linguistic and cultural considerations. Same thing should apply here. What are some of the linguistic and cultural considerations you're thinking through? Some questions I think off of the top of my head is like

- How you should greet family members
- Who you should speak with to discuss serious matters
- Who should be present during these meetings
- Generational and gender differences
- Some cultures attribute credibility and respect based off of one's attire

So that's just a couple of things.

Nick: I think it's also a good point in time to mention that we often think of culture in terms of race and ethnicity. It's super important to note that each part of the United States has different cultures. You said it to me before, “Being Black in New York is a different experience than being Black in the Pacific Northwest.”

Ha, you took the words right out of my mouth.

I realize that I'm slowly entering into rambling territory but bear with me. I'm just rounding the bases a little slower today. It's been a long decade this year.

But my grand point is that we need to address the inherent mistrust of the process and mistrusts communities of color have in white supremacist systems which includes our education system.

One way I can see us mitigating some of this is through the use of cultural brokers. That homie you got that can help you link and bridge the gaps. You can also adopt or start using cultural screening tools. Be cognizant of the language you're using.

Nick: Absolutely, some of these languages families speak have their own unique structure and communication style (e.g., direct vs. non-direct) that may be different from English, and I think it is important to point out that right now we're talking about how to engage with the adult's in the child's life, but we must also apply this lens to when we see that adult interact with the child. The communication there may be counterintuitive to what you know and do as an educator in the child's life. Your point about a cultural broker reminds me that in some way, we educators are brokers in child development and education to the families and caregivers of the children we spend time with. Yet educators are not always equipped to have a cultural broker from them to the family and/or caregiver unit.... in the same way we are with children to their adults. And I think this point is a small ray out of the whole blinding light how important diverse and equitable early education needs to be.

Mike: Also, understand some of the social roles that families are operating from. Knowledge of all of this will support you as you connect with families who might be reluctant. The last thing I'll say on this is what I started with. The onus is on us as educators, as ECE professionals to connect with families. Not the other way around. When families ignore you, say they don't trust you, disregard you, whatever it may be. It's still on you to reach out and make connections.

Mike: Phew, that was a lot. My mouth is dry. So how about we pause to take a couple of questions on what we just discussed. We can take about 3 right now. Any questions, comments, thoughts? Unmute yourself. We'd also love to hear how you identify, Latinx, Chamorro, Serbian, Ethonopian, White, Afro etc.

Mike: We'll be right back.

Alright yall, so everyone knows that childcare is essential. We're some of the most influential people out there. Yet, we are often under paid and overworked. So how can you work full time, have hobbies, show your friends and family love, self care, and also fine tune your skills and grow more in depth? That's where we come in. These napcasts, 25, 30 minute segments are designed to help you learn on the go, hear another perspective, spark debate, agree incessantly, and honestly, remind you that you're not alone. We live in a complex world, so allow us to challenge your perspective. So, are your headphones in? Did you turn the volume up? Alright now. Let's get it.

Nick: You know, Michael, you make this easy. Usually, when we're sharing content ideas before jumping on Napcast, I often think "why that's what I'm thinking too!" Or you help me filter through ideas. The idea of their being some sort of broker was stirring and I remembered an interaction I had. At Daybreak we have had children with another home language. One day I was on the playground, and I was speaking Spanish with a 4 year old girl trying to hone in my conversational skills, and she could tell I wasn't keeping up with her

and she'd put her face in her palm, mutter something, giggle and then repeated herself...sloowly. I responded to her, and this 4 year old boy came up and said, "This isn't Spanish school." And thankfully I have experience to lean back on, and asked, "What's the school called?" "Daybreak," he said.

I asked, "I wonder if you're thinking about me and so-in-so speaking Spanish?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Oooo yeah, I learned that at Daybreak there's lots of languages spoken." I motioned to the sign above the outdoor kitchen that said "kitchen" in Lushootseed, the ancestral language of the Duwamish people of what we call Seattle. "Want to tell her your name?"

He nodded eagerly and we went through me llamo... several times. And it made me so happy because now when I come to the playground he asks me things to say to her. They play together a lot. I got to be a cultural broker in a sense.

Mike: You said something earlier that I was going to ask you right now but you hit me with a Euro-step with that anecdote. So now I'm more interested in hearing about the different languages you have at Daybreak.

How have you personally as an educator and now as a director, have increased your children's, colleagues, staff, and overall your program's awareness of Indigenous languages?

Nick: Nah man, its been the other way around. I'm learning something even greater than I could have imagined. With every interaction the awareness of pride and a generational strength in that pride fills the space in such a way that a sense of belonging and affirmation linger. I am becoming familiar with what mother tongue a family speaks.

Specifically though, to the programming piece that I think you're talking about, once we get out of COVID, you know there's going to be a big Pow Wow! Daybreak will be celebrating big no doubt. And once we settle down from that, and return back, Convening with the community to talk about key holidays that are community and culturally relevant. I'd really love to see how to connect the preschool program to something like the Elder's program: get their input on those key holidays, how did they celebrate it, what was it like for them as a child. For our work as educators, connecting relationships is something we're good at, and bringing in the intergenerational piece is incredibly important. This encourages actionable steps towards cultural and linguistic revitalization.

Mike: You got like a whole IEP for the program, I love it. Mostly because I'm a proponent that every child should have an IEP – an individual educational plan. Given the topic today, I'm interested in hearing how do you as a preschool educator or a toddler educator, given the rapid losses of languages and cultures around the world, implement an IEP plan for a specific child that supports their home language and home culture?

Nick: I like your, uuum sort of reclamation or adjustment of IEP. Maybe it's not many people, I don't know, but I think when people hear IEP they think of a learning disability...something framed in the negative you know?

First that has to be created in partnership with the family and/or caregiving unit of the child. Asking them what sort of books could the class look into including instruments, maybe provide a cheat sheet of common phrases/requests/numbers. I started a file of collected cheat sheet just before I left Hilltop. I think being real and asking families which holidays they celebrate, you know...don't just assume the Indian family in your class celebrates Holi, just because they speak hindi or whatever. I think too, it could be beneficial to ask how do they want you to treat and communicate with their child in regards to matters of respect, asking and telling, etc. Providing communications in their preferred language is obvious but often gets overlooked. And really, find a process of accountability that keeps you practicing some of the child's home language.

Nick: So you worked in afterschool, school-aged programs, and with teens before coming to Hilltop. When? Where?

And I know you want me to plug a presentation you have called "Reflective Dialogue to Disrupt Racial Realities."... In that you speak about how educators need to better understand children's cultural capital, their cultural wealth, and their cultural funds of knowledge. Break that down for us and how do you apply this to school-aged children?

Mike: Yeah man, here's a crash course in what I mean. I can't give too much away. It's a presentation and how I make my living. But, I'll give yall a lil taste.

What I mean by all of this is basically children and families come to you already steeped in centuries of culture. Generations of culture. That's something we need to honor. Children have a wealth of knowledge, of ways of being, of speaking, acting, doing etc.

See, when we think of culture we usually pigeon hole it into the usual suspects of religion, cooking, and language. But we never think about how culture influences or is influenced or how culture is a part of everything from technology, to agriculture, to geographic, to politics, to economics.

Our cultural funds of knowledge are vast. It's the concept of fairness. It's the notions of modesty. It's our body language. It's the importance of space – I'm always telling colleagues to back the hell away from me. Don't sneak up on me. Imma fight you. Haha.

Nick: This is where a cultural broker comes in handy, people

Our cultural capital is how we define and shape our educational experiences. It's an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression. But I can't claim that. That's a quote from professor Tara Yosso down in Cali. It's written on a sticky note I have somewhere on my not so clean desk right now.

Now this is where I get the question "how do we use this in the classroom?" Which I hate because people just want the answer. Which I could do. But that's a cookie cutter approach.

Nick: That's what I was saying earlier! We're in a fix-it move on mindset. Doesn't work? On to the next. We don't want to go through a process!

The cookie cutter approach is something we have tried since, I don't know, the beginning of time, and now we're sitting here panicking because we realized that hasn't worked for all. This goes back to the theme of the conference - The system wasn't built for us.

That's why I emphasize the process.

First you have to understand.

Second you have to uncover. It's through observation, interviews, and analyzing student classwork, observe what forms of capital are present.

Third you have to identify.

Fourth you have to have a growth mindset.

Fifth you have to then learn and apply.

Sixth, you have to listen.

Seventh, you have to undo and apply.

So here's one example that I use from that presentation on how to apply it to a school aged program.

So the homie in our class is Puerto-rican and Black. And they were struggling understanding math concepts. Nothing new right? That's something you hear children say all the time. But with this kid, they were really good at mathematical concepts the year before. So we had to understand what changed. Turns out they didn't like the way we were presenting the materials and didn't like the educator.

So, in order to support the kid, we had to observe ways that he engaged in his learning through play during his afterschool enrichment classes. We saw that when they were immersed in an experience, their brilliance shown thru.

We have to identify what is important and of value in the lives of students would enrich lessons in the classroom and draw on students' funds of knowledge and their different forms of capital. It can't just be us doing what we always do because that's the way the previous class or kid learned. They loved dramatic play. That's what was important to them.

In order to do this work, you have to have a growth mindset.

By observing and checking our own biases and having a growth mindset, we then created math equations through stories. Through dramatic play. We connected it to some of the economic issues his families were facing. Humanitarian issues back in PR. And suddenly, math was their easiest subject again.

So that's all I got man. There are many ways children across all ages utilize their various forms of community cultural wealth. We're not taught to connect this knowledge with learning because we're too concerned with hitting benchmarks and securing funding as programs or

being recognized as teacher of the year. When we center children's culture at the heart of what we do, then we can find meaningful ways to make the learning meaningful to them.

Nick: Word. And I'm just going to top that off by bringing out beyond culture, if you don't mind Mike. Children's time and experiences with us should reflect and honor the child's present. And in those present-moments our language matters the most, because how we speak to them becomes their inner voice.

Mike: Alright, so that's all we got yall. Thank you once again for listening in to another Napcast. Feel free to follow us or if you know of anyone who identifies as a voice of color or male identifying then email us at institute@hilltopcc.org and we'd love to have them on!