From September, educational settings are to be inspected using a revised Education Inspection Framework (EIF). Within this new framework, the term ‘cultural capital’ has been introduced. All settings will now receive a judgement about the quality of education offered, determined by how well the curriculum provides children with cultural capital.

The term is defined as the ‘essential knowledge that children need to prepare them for future success’. Settings have a key responsibility through their teaching and learning intentions to make a difference for all children in order to help them ‘experience the awe and wonder of the world in which they live, through the seven areas of learning’ (Ofsted 2019).

So why has this term been introduced, and why has it incited so much debate across the education sector? Cultural capital sits with the Government’s intention to reduce social inequalities – of which education is seen as being instrumental in realising this ambition. Through bestowing education capital on children and families whose backgrounds are deemed disadvantaged, there is a view that this will increase their life chances – effectively creating a more equal playing field.

THE ORIGINS OF CULTURAL CAPITAL
The term cultural capital is most commonly associated with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He developed this term as part of a wider framework that he used to explain the inequalities that exist within the social world.

Bourdieu used the analogy of game-playing to explain how within any social field there are many different players. Each player brings with them a particular set of capital, in the form of economic (money and assets) and cultural (education and qualifications). The amount of economic and cultural capital possessed determines a player’s social capital, which effectively gives them membership to a particular social group.

Capital is something that is accumulated over time and can be exchanged in order to benefit your life in some way. The accumulation of capital begins as soon as a child is born. The greater the investment a parent can make towards their child’s learning and development, then the more likely they are to be school-ready.

Habitus
Membership of a social group also assumes the possession of a particular set of dispositions. Bourdieu referred to this as habitus. Dispositions are all-
Cultural Capital in the Preschool Years

ANNA GORDON

Third-year-old Rania has recently moved from Egypt and now attends the LEYF Queensborough Community Nursery in west London. Her mum has started a small business in baking delicately made cakes which are commonly eaten in Egypt. One day at nursery, many of the children were enjoying using the cutters and rolling pins to make birthday cakes. Manager Jean Hudson was sitting with the children also making ‘cakes’. Rania went over to the home corner and started a small business in baking cakes. She collected her thrice she would like to do some baking with the children.

To what extent do the learning experiences you provide for children have cultural relevance?

What do you do in partnership with your parents to genuinely know and understand the funds of knowledge their children are bringing to your setting?

In what ways may we shut down opportunities for children to gain cultural capital if we do not understand their unique cultural background?

**CASE STUDY: RESPONDING TO FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE**

Three-year-old Rania has recently moved from Egypt and now attends the LEYF Queensborough Community Nursery in west London. Her mum has started a small business in baking delicately made cakes which are commonly eaten in Egypt. One day at nursery, many of the children were enjoying using the cutters and rolling pins to make birthday cakes. Manager Jean Hudson was sitting with the children also making ‘cakes’. Rania went over to the home corner and started a small business in baking cakes. She collected her thrice she would like to do some baking with the children.

**REFLECTION POINT**

What sorts of assumptions may we make about children that lead us to view them in a deficit manner?

**FUNDING OF KNOWLEDGE: AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

When children first enter an early years setting, they bring with them their own unique cultural capital. Embodied within this is a set of dispositions towards learning (or what Bourdieu referred to as habits). Within the EYFS, these dispositions are referred to as Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL). These ‘habits of mind’ which, given the right opportunities, can expand our children’s potential and help us to build confidence to experiment and try things out (Stewart 2011). Is this what Ofsted perceive as a prerequisite capability in order to experience ‘awe and wonder’?

This approach to cultural capital lends itself to a sociocultural perspective of learning. It encourages us to think about capital in the form of the unique funds of knowledge that children bring from their home into their educational setting. Funds of knowledge are the bodies of knowledge related to information, skills and strategies which underlie household functioning, development and well-being.

An easy way of understanding this idea is to reflect on your own upbringing. What everyday activities took place in your home of which you were directly or indirectly involved? These activities may have covered anything from cooking to cleaning, mealtimes, screen time and shopping. There will be many things that you would learn about household functioning through your involvement, and you will have taken this learning into other aspects of your life beyond your immediate environment.

**LANGUAGE**

Language will have been a key feature in these activities and it is a cultural tool that we need in order to participate in social activities. When children are acquiring funds of knowledge, they are actively engaged in the learning process. They also have an intrinsic motivation to be involved and will, therefore, be more likely to want to participate actively.

Think about the toddler who is insistently putting on their own shoes or the four-year-old who wants to help wash the car. During these encounters they will need to engage in a range of metacognitive processes that may involve taking risks, trying things out and persisting until the goal is achieved. The adult plays an important role in this activity.

Because they have a close, personal relationship with the child, they know how to tune in to their thinking and share a common language and a common

**EYFS best practice**

Children’s fund of knowledge includes what they have learned at home

Adults who have close relationships with children can tune in to their thinking
The.interface of children’s play and teachers, pedagogical practices’ in Brooker E and Edwards S Engaging Play. OU Press


Stewart N (2011) How Children Learn: The characteristics of effective learning. BAEC

Dr Jo Basford is senior lecturer in childhood, youth and education at Manchester Metropolitan University

Acknowledgements
With thanks to the staff at the London Early Years Foundation nurseries for their contributions to this article

LEYS NURSERIES: DEVELOPING CULTURAL CAPITAL

Children who come to the LEYF nurseries have rich, diverse backgrounds, and many of the nurseries are mixed in terms of social cultural and economic capital. Going out into the community is an everyday event for the children and usually has a purpose. It may be to visit the local fire station, following an invitation to come and see the new fire engine. Sometimes the children have planned an activity that requires them to go shopping.

One day, the children at one LEYF nursery were making faces out of fruit, and they were unsure what they could use for ‘blue’ eyes. A trip to the local shop provided the children and adults with an opportunity to look at the blueberries, grapes and plums. Lots of discussion ensued about the names of the fruit, their taste, texture and their appropriateness for their task.

One Saturday a group of dads and their children from another LEYF nursery went to the local Chinese restaurant for lunch. Families from many cultural backgrounds went to the restaurant. As well as the usual ‘dad’ conversation, there was lots of discussion about their own cultural traditions regarding food.

On another occasion, the children had been thinking about how lullabies can help babies to sleep. This led to parents sharing their own family lullabies (written in their home language) which formed a display in the entrance. This was a way of sharing cultural capital and bringing families together through a shared language. At the LEYF nursery in Soho, there is an emphasis on the arts. The setting has had an eclectic range of visitors who have come to work with the children. Visitors include drag queens who come to read stories to artists, and musicians who come to work with the children. The nursery recently created a pop-up art exhibition with art work that had been produced by the children. This culminated in a community event which included an auction of the children’s art work.

Cultural capital is central to the curriculum and pedagogy at LEYF. To find out more, see chief executive June O’Sullivan’s blog:

wwwLEYF.org.uk/what-is-cultural-capital
wwwLEYF.org.uk/cultural-capital-in-action