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Creating Culturally Consistent and Inclusive Early Childhood Programs for All Children and Families

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Culture As Process

Culture is often thought of in terms of art, artifacts, foods, music. However, these are material products of culture, they do not define it. Culture is much more — encompassing how a specific group views and interacts with the world and including explicit and implicit rules for behavior. Participation in their family's culture gives growing children the power to influence their environment and to have an impact on the world. Cultural identity also creates a shared sense of belonging and connection. As Carol Brunson Phillips once put it, "Remember what happened to ET when he got too far from home? He lost his ability to thrive and, ultimately, even survive."

Cultural identity is often confused with ethnic origin. Although the two aspects are linked, they are not synonymous. Ethnic origin tells us the general group background of a person; cultural identity comes from the specific ways that a family daily practices the beliefs, values, rules, traditions of its ethnic group. Although ethnic groups share cultural patterns, its members do not all act exactly alike. Some people also have the mistaken understanding that culture is related to skin color, but individuals with similar skin color come from very different cultural groups.

No child is born culturally aware or culturally proficient. Rather, culture is learned as a child develops. The process of learning the rules and views of one's family is called enculturation. As children move from home into the wider community, they must also learn the rules for interacting within their larger context. Some children's home and community cultures are congruent. However, for many children, the larger community operates by a different set of rules and expectations; and then the child must learn new behaviors (sometimes including a new language) in order to operate successfully in that system. This process is called acculturation. The child also learns to code switch, learns what to do when, and which set of rules applies where. This is the process of becoming bicultural.

Cultural Consistency

Cultural consistency means creating cultural continuity with the child's home culture in the care/education setting. This includes just about everything we do — how we interact with children, talk with them, comfort them, discipline them, guide them in learning new social, cognitive, and physical skills, as well as the visual and material environment we set up. Searching for ways to provide an environment of familiarity, validity, and empowerment FOR ALL is essential to meeting our responsibility as educators to honor, celebrate, and validate the whole child.

Every child enters school with culture competency in their home culture. Some of these experiences will "fit" our existing programming and some will not. A culturally consistent educator will value, include, and build upon all children's cultural realities. Culturally consistent programming is not a deficiency approach. It does not mean that we lower our standards of teaching; it does mean that we change the vehicles we use to arrive there.

What happens if we don't provide culturally consistent early childhood programs? The child learns that what is important at home is not important at school. Remembering ET, the child loses her power to act effectively. If

the child spends more hours at school than at home (as do many children in full-day programs), she may refuse to continue being socialized by her family. In these cases, the precious bond between the child and her family may be broken.

Creating culturally consistent curriculum is an ongoing process of information gathering, negotiating, and creative problem solving. We have found the following four questions to be a useful framework for making curriculum decisions:

- What do I/family want children to know?
- Why do I/family want them to know this?
- When do I/family think children should know this?
- How shall I/family help them learn this?

Answering these questions is a regular, ongoing process that requires collaboration between staff and between staff and families. We have to start with what we already know as educators and then reinvent what we do with each new group of children — by using our own knowledge and experiences, infusing the child's community into classroom experiences, educating ourselves in the process, and modeling respectful and adaptive behavior to each child and family.

Intercultural Inclusion and Competency

Children also need to know how to be interculturally competent, and how to act/speak in the mainstream culture. An intertwining of home and mainstream culture provides children with the foundation for more successful experiences. It is our job to provide clarity and support as we teach them to successfully operate in more than one kind of culture.

ReGena explains how she went about doing this:

One of my first tasks at the beginning of each new school year was to define the culture of our classroom. I knew the classroom population would arrive with various cultures, traditions, languages, and life experiences. I wanted to facilitate bringing us together with the goals of maintaining cultural integrity for each child, and to spark their interest and respect for the various cultures they would encounter. We began by setting ground rules for respecting each other: no name calling, using the family's pronunciation of each person's name, respecting the languages spoken at home, listening to each other, working cooperatively with each other.

The basic tenets of our classroom revolved around group identity (you are a valued member of this class), decision making (you can make choices), cooperation (working together for a common goal), sharing resources (communal use items), setting goals, being as creative as we possibly could, and believing in ourselves and each other. Within this framework, we spent the rest of our school year learning about the cultures *we* brought into our classroom.

Although a predominantly English speaking class, five additional languages were represented among the children (French, Hebrew, Kiswahili, Mandarin, and Spanish). Our approach was to encourage all children, staff, and families to communicate, to include everyone in all communication efforts, and to take pride in knowing more than one language. The rewards of such an approach are many. I love the sense of accomplishment, acknowledgment, and mastery as children teach, validate, and negotiate with each other.

One November day, five year old John comes running into the room with a just barely three year old Isabel in tow. Flushed and excited, John blurts out, "Hey! She speaks Spanish and we're LEARNING to!" Isabel, flushed and out of breath is nodding, smiling, and saying, "Si! Si!"

John was so excited that he'd understood something Isabel had said that he grabbed her and ran in to share the good news with me.

Bilingualism and cultural inclusiveness is a two-way street!

Getting Started

Creating culturally consistent and culturally inclusive programs requires thoughtful planning. There are no recipes, but there are some principles that we can use as building blocks:

- **Know yourself.** You are the starting place and most important resource. What do you know about your cultural identity, including your family's original language(s)? For example, one of us grew up in a family with deep roots in several different African American communities, among them Chicago, Mississippi and Louisiana deltas, New York City, and Maryland's St. Mary's and Prince George's counties. English is her primary language, yet she is also surrounded by regional dialects, cultural dialects, youthful jargon, "standard/non-standard" choices, and forgotten ancestral tongues. Another of us grew up in a Jewish family in New York City, with grandparents on both sides having been

immigrants from Russian. Her mother's first languages were Yiddish and Russian. What do we know about the historic price our families paid in order to "make it" in the dominant culture. What can be reclaimed?

Thoughtful examination of our values, norms, and styles of communication can serve as a context to take "the position of the other." Ask yourself, "What would I need to feel at home?" "What validates me?" As we gain more awareness and appreciation of how our culture shapes our own views and behavior, it is likely that we will transfer this process to the lives of others.

• **Rid ourselves of the mistaken belief that cultural differences imply superior or inferior ways of being in the world.** This is a strong message in our society, learned by many of us in childhood, and constantly reinforced by the media. If we *really* think that the dominant mainstream American culture is the "right" or "normal" way, and that children who are not a part of it are lacking, then we will not create either culturally consistent or culturally inclusive settings. Instead, we will fall into the traps of "tourist multicultural curriculum," which treats mainstream culture as the norm for daily curriculum, and only "visits" other cultures from time to time.

We are more likely to be willing to adapt what we do when we respect the people we are serving. Here is an example from one of our teaching experiences that illustrates how bias in our society can lead to adaptations for some but not for others:

I was working in several preschools which had the same 9:00 a.m. starting time. Three served lower income families and one served upper middle class families. The first three expected children to be in class and ready to engage in activities no later than 9:05. The latter was the only program willing to provide a flexible opening schedule to meet parents' needs.

• **Move away from a "one size fits all" curriculum.** Treating all children the same is not true equality. "Sameness" implies only one norm for development. We must remember the process of enculturation and acculturation. Some children will experience continuity between the two as they enter your program, and the ways you do things will be familiar and congruent with their existing knowledge and experiences. However, some children who are competent within their home culture will experience difficult and damaging cultural discontinuity unless you are willing to make changes in how you work with them. In this regard, providing culturally consistent programs is very much like individualizing. We not only take a child's personal characteristics into account, but also their family's culture. We learn about both the individual and cultural needs of a child through observation, frequent conversations with parents, home visits, and discussion with staff. Taking workshops and reading can help us strengthen these important skills.

Certainly, there will be many challenges as you seek to "open up" and expand your curriculum, teaching styles, and languages to meet the individual and cultural needs of all your children. Each move you make to greater cultural consistency and inclusion leads to new issues and challenges. Yet, it's the challenges that will lead to liberation. New questions open up new struggles and sometimes conflict. But working with staff and family members to find creative solutions leads to growth — for ourselves as well as the children we serve.

Reference

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