

Voices in Search of Cultural Continuity in Communities

A dialogue between Marion Hironaka Cowee, Kim Statum Francisco, Moraima Mendoza, and Carol Mills facilitated by Cecelia Alvarado

As we consider the concept of professionalism, it is important to realize that different ethnic/cultural communities may have different ways of relating to the concept and different expectations of the professionals with whom they work and who care for their children. With this in mind, I was privileged to interview four early care and education professionals, who come from communities of color, in a variety of locations across the country. I have known and worked with each of them in different professional contexts, over a number of years, and have found them to be among the most earnest, critical thinkers I know.

My questions to them focused on three main areas of inquiry: 1) the differences between the mainstream, European-American concept of professionalism and that of their own community; 2) the characteristics — behaviors, attitudes, values — that people of color look for in the professionals who are serving their families; and 3) the implications for training professionals of color or those who will work in communities of color.

In hopes that the richness of their responses will stimulate the reader to consider different paradigms, cultural contexts, and ways of delivering services to children and parents, I offer the following excerpts from our conversation with one caution — that is, that each of these women is speaking from her own experience and cultural context. They do not intend to speak for all members of their ethnic/cultural groups, and each acknowledges great variation among the populations from which they come. However, the similarities we will find between these perspectives of women of color and those specific to each group, should give each of us pause to consider these points when working with the communities represented in this dialogue.

The Concept of Professionalism in Communities of Color

The concept of professionalism appears to be a mainstream construct, one that comes from outside the experiences of the Latino, Japanese, African-American, and Wampanoag communities of these four women. Their



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Marion Hironaka Cowee is Japanese-American, a career advocate at Bananas, Inc. Resource and Referral, Oakland, California.

Moraima Mendoza is a Latina working at the Spanish American Union, Springfield, Massachusetts, as the early care and education director and director of the Latino Family Child Care Association.

Carol Mills is Ojibway, living in a community of largely Wampanoag Native people in Mashpee, Massachusetts, who works for Cape Cod Child Development, Early Intervention, as an education specialist and is also a training and technical assistance consultant for Head Start and Early Head Start.

Kim Statum Francisco is African-American, and is the project director of Parents as Partners in Education, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

responses to the term differ slightly but reveal common themes.

The Latinos that Moraima works with don't feel comfortable with the use of the word *professional*, as it infers "acting superior." Kim reports that her community "clearly has individuals that are successful in professional life (traditional paths re: degrees, etc.), but legitimate status also comes from their local small business development and church-based leadership roles that may not entail owning wealth and degrees."

In the Native community where Carol lives, the term *professional* has negative connotations. Members of her community often perceive a professional as not having "cultural, traditional, family ways." She notes that her community "does not always readily trust in existing mainstream institutions and, therefore, may have a lack of understanding of systems and services. The *white tape* bureaucracy sometimes produces professionals that may act in a demanding, humiliating manner that leaves community members feeling degraded and confused."

Marion perceives that her community of Japanese-Americans views professionals from within their community as, "... more down to earth, less having to live up to image, emotionally connected (one's behavior is affected by people and lives of those present), organic/not packaged." She senses a conflict between the philosophy to "Don't overstate your reach by saying you can take on things that you haven't done before," as her Sansei (third) generation has been taught by the Nisei (second generation), and the larger European-American mainstream expectation that one is supposed to "sell themselves" in their profession.

Clearly, within European-American communities there may also be some of these sentiments, but the point here is that the generally accepted, positive notion of *professional* as used in our field is seen quite differently in these communities.

Characteristics that People of Color Look For in the Professionals Who Serve Their Families

Carol observes that "trust and confidentiality" are the most important characteristics for professionals to bring to "small communities that have a fear of not being able to have either." Says Carol, "Being loving, not as structured, not rigid in discipline, casual, flexible in time allowances and emergency and family matters" are essential characteristics if a professional is to be effective and accepted in

the Wampanoag community. Keeping talking to a minimum is also viewed positively. Often, Carol's community perceives professionals from other communities as bringing a strong emphasis on verbal communication: "So much talking." In contrast, the Native way values "a respect for silence and other ways of communicating, utilizing body movement to show approval or disapproval." Carol notes that early childhood teachers from outside the community seem to use words such as "Good job!" even when "a child's action itself is rewarding."

Kim believes that, "children need to be where they are respected and adored." In the African-American communities of Kim's experience, a respected professional in the early childhood field is evaluated by her interaction with children and families, "Do I see folk comfortable as people of color and do they translate that to children? What mode of discipline do they use? Can I see my child here?" Kim continues, "Building a strong personal relationship with each parent, interacting genuinely, encouraging parental involvement, and accepting them, fully, with whatever life situations they bring is also critically important to building trust."

Marion reflects that, "being approachable, respectful, listening to others, not intimidating, kind, down home, and cooperative rather than competitive" are important traits of professionals who work in the Japanese community. She continues that sometimes professionals from outside the community present "certain behaviors and a visual perception (smooth) that results in an emotional disconnect" for families.

Moraima advises that successful professionals in the Latino community are recognized because, "they bring lots of knowledge and skills and they are accessible. They have the attitude that we are all teachers and learners. They involve people, and they don't keep a distance. Whites sometimes give the message, 'Don't get too close, I'm just here to get the information.' Meetings are often rigid — not set-up for participation. Time is an issue; hold your comments to the end."

Implications for Training of Professionals from Communities of Color or Others Who Will Work in Them

"My experience in mainstream society is that theory and philosophy are often treated as more important than relationships," offers Marion. "It is true that we should be proud to have a well-articulated philosophy in our programs, but I find that when teachers of color bring some-

thing different, it may not be valued. There is no dialogue about this. Teachers are emotionally discounted if they have different cultural values. I have worked in mainstream centers that expected me to give up the nurturing part of myself (not to do anything for children that they could do for themselves) because they valued independence. I value interdependence — and I felt uncomfortable being who I am and relating in ways that felt culturally inconsistent to who I am. At the time, I was not clear about the exact issues. I knew it didn't feel right, but I couldn't identify the issues of power and I couldn't talk about the cultural conflict. I'm sure that the directors and others never intended for me to feel stifled and powerless, but I did feel that way. They had strong, principled programs and I have no doubt that they wanted to meet the needs of the children, but my need to respond from my culturally authentic place was neither encouraged nor valued."

So, what are the implications/suggested strategies for training professionals for our field? Suggested strategies from Kim for developing professionals for her community include the following:

- In your recruitment efforts, contact people personally (as opposed to using flyers) about training being offered.
- Ask community professionals what they need in terms of professional development (don't assume you know).
- Be flexible in accommodating the needs of individuals and their families.

Marion adds:

- Respect the subtleties of cultural practices (such as in Japanese communities, avoiding confrontational situations, taking someone aside as opposed to raising an issue in a staff meeting).
- Allow people with different perspectives to voice them without being labeled *troublemaker* (e.g., "When you are not so angry, come back.").

Carol offers:

- Avoid the attitude of superiority that is present when we value book knowledge over knowledge of our elders (the wisdom of nature, time, and experience).
- Support natural time schedules (seasons, our body systems, etc.) as opposed to always promoting *clock* time.

- Allow for slower processing/thinking before talking, that some groups may need.

Moraima contributes:

- If we want people to receive the full benefits of the professional development we provide, it should be offered in the language in which they think and they understand.
- With Latinos and some other people of color, realize that the term *professional* brings with it a lot of baggage. It may be preferable to speak about building a person's competence to provide culturally appropriate services and effectively advocate for families.

In search of cultural continuity in communities, spend additional time at the beginning of a meeting to inquire about the health of family members before moving to the agenda. Invite respected elders in a community to offer timeless wisdom about child rearing practices. Offer training in a language other than English — practices not usually a part of the professional development of providers. Most importantly, take the time to listen, ask questions, and try new ways of being.

How to Use Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Cultural continuity in your center. Replicate the rich exchange of information shared here in your school. Identify staff members or parents who represent diverse cultures who are willing to help add cultural insight into the three main areas of inquiry addressed in the article (see p. 42). Share the article with teachers and schedule an uninterrupted time for your panel to respond to the three areas of inquiry. Follow this replication with a discussion among teachers identifying areas of similarities and differences and how insights might be added or included in interactions, curricula, or policies and procedures.

Including cultural differences in philosophies. Cowee brings up an interesting dilemma related to philosophy statements (see p. 43). Are there avenues to discuss cultural conflicts that are created by cultural variations among staff and parents? Do you give teachers a chance to reflect on your school's philosophy statement and identify cultural variations that might need to be included or modified? Analyzing your school's philosophy statement in light of cultural differences or variations would be a great follow-up activity to the replication activity above.

Cultural continuity survey. Consider conducting a survey of the characteristics that your families consider important in professionals like the one suggested by Alvarado (see p. 43). Use the results to help teachers understand how they are viewed differently by parents representing different cultural groups. Follow this with a candid discussion with teachers about how they might modify their professional behaviors to reflect these variations.