

Why Address Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Preservice and Inservice Preparation?

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*“Dealing with diversity is one of the central challenges of 21st century education. It is impossible to prepare tomorrow’s teachers to succeed with **all** of the students they will meet without exploring how students’ learning experiences are influenced by their home languages, cultures, and contexts; the realities of race and class privilege in the United States; the ongoing manifestations of institutional racism within the educational system; and the many factors that shape students’ opportunities to learn within individual classrooms. To teach effectively, teachers need to understand how learning depends on their ability to draw connections to what learners already know, to support students’ motivation and willingness to risk trying and to engender a climate of trust between and among adults and students.”* (Darling-Hammond & Garcia-Lopez, 2002, p. 9).

American schools are educating approximately 11 million children of immigrants, more than ever before. About 5.5 million students, 10 percent of public school enrollment, speak little or no English. Children of color are the majority of students enrolled in all of the largest 5 school districts. African American children make up approximately 1/3 of all children enrolled in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). This increase in the diversity of the children can be juxtaposed with the decreasing diversity found in the teaching pool. Similar imbalances in ethnicity and race exist between the students in special education and professional special education personnel and leadership (Becket, 1998; Henke, Choy, Gies, & Broughman, 1996). The low enrollment of individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in colleges of education (Sleeter, 2001; Campbell-Whatley, 2003), the dearth of faculty members from under-represented populations in institutions of higher education (American Council on Education, 1988) and the low numbers in the field of special education further alert us to the lack of preparedness for teaching diverse learners that may result as an outcome of the mismatch between the teacher, the university faculty pool, and the children and families they serve.

Early childhood (EC) teacher educators and those involved in inservice professional development will play a significant role in responding to the central challenges of 21st century education (Isenberg, 2000). Those who work with preservice and inservice early educators must ensure that teacher education and professional development programs are designed in ways to support the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to work competently, comfortably, and confidently with culturally and linguistically diverse young children and their families. The primary premise of this chapter is that meeting the challenge for early care and education in the 21st century requires a commitment on the part of inservice and preservice faculty to examine early care and education for diverse learners with a transformed, sharper, and more critical lens.

The Meaning of Culture and Dimensions of Cultural Diversity

“Wow, I never knew that I had culture. I always thought I was just a regular American. I assumed that culture was something exotic, something other people have.” This statement frequently is heard among preservice and inservice groups and is at the heart of the personnel preparation challenge for scaffolding personnel to better understand cultural and linguistic diversity. Successful professional development requires that we tackle head on the assumption that culture is something exotic in order to fully explore the meaning of culture and the meaning ascribed to the term cultural diversity. For example, the term “cultural diversity” may be understood as code for “new immigrants”, for those who are different from oneself, or for persons of color. By untangling meanings, preservice and inservice teachers are able to come to the understanding that we all have culture and that culture plays a central role in our beliefs, biases, assumptions, and in the decisions we make when teaching children and working with their families. Without this understanding, well meaning teachers will continue to see children and families from cultures other than their own as “other” and “different,” ultimately occupying positions across an invisible divide. Several key understandings can assist preservice and inservice teachers in acquiring this new lens.

Understanding the tangible and intangible role of culture

Culture has dimensions that are both tangible and intangible. It is the tangible elements that have become most closely identified with common definitions of culture. These often form the basis for culture fairs and cultural exchanges that are the limited ways in which schools and programs take on a multicultural agenda. Tangible representations of culture include dress, typical foods, holidays, and artifacts. Because these tangible representations of culture are those most easily addressed in such venues as family dinners or culture weeks, they can lend themselves to supporting cultural stereotypes rather than deepening understanding of others.

Yet, it is likely that the intangible elements of culture have the more powerful impact on our daily lives and perhaps have the greater influence on the interactions between professionals, children, and their families. The intangible elements of culture are the beliefs, values, and practices that have shaped us and that we take for granted as just being the way things are and should be. Because it is the medium that surrounds us, it has been suggested that these intangible elements of culture can be as difficult for us to recognize as water is for the proverbial fish. Thus, it is in the intangibles that cultural clashes potentially can occur. Examples of intangible elements of culture that can challenge teachers in the context of early care and education are their deeply held beliefs about childrearing, such as when, what, and how to feed children; when and how to toilet train children; when and how to discipline and under what circumstances; and when and in what ways children’s independence should be encouraged. In each of these beliefs lies the potential for serious power struggles with families or the potential for powerful learning dialogues with families.

Understanding the role of culture in the lives of children and families

As can be seen from the definitions above, culture plays a central role in each of our lives. It is what shapes who we are and how we view the world. It is not something someone else has; rather, it is something we all have. It is essential that preservice and inservice teachers recognize the ways in which culture plays a role in the lives of the children and families with whom they work. In so doing, they are more able to create learning opportunities that reflect the beliefs and values of families and that reflect children's cultural communities (Moll, 1990). These culturally responsive environments ensure continuity for young children as they enter early care and education (Thorp & Sanchez, 1998).

Understanding the role of culture in the lives of professionals and in their practices

As has been stated above, culture is something we all carry, invisible and powerful. Consequently, it is impossible to believe that early care and education providers are culture-free in their provision of services. Culture plays a central role in the design and implementation of early childhood services. For example, there has been much study of the Reggio Emilia approach to work with young children in Italy, and several preschools in the United States are attempting to replicate the approach here. However, Lally (2001) suggests that the model is derived from a culturally shared view of children and families and of the responsibility of the community for supporting families and children. As a result, he suggests that it would not be possible to fully replicate the model in the dominant cultural climate in the United States. Decisions about the form and function of early care and education, as well as about the roles of professionals and families in early care and education and ultimately, decisions about the nature of learning and what is to be learned, are all culturally linked (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998).

Further, attitudes about disabilities, about the role of individuals with disabilities, about expectations for them, and about the nature of appropriate curriculum are also bound by cultural beliefs (Skrtic, 1995), as are attitudes about the families of children with disabilities (Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Consider, for example, the following situations:

- a teacher does not understand why family members are always late for their appointments and then still want to talk with the teacher;
- a family, embedded in a large extended family network, does not understand the rule that only one family member can go on a field trip, so they keep their child home;
- a family seems to refuse to collaborate with the child care center on their goal for a toddler to feed himself using utensils;
- a mother appears to lack any structure or routine and instead follows her young preschooler around offering her food whenever she seems to be hungry.

In each of these instances, there is a frustrated caregiver and perhaps a frustrated or misunderstood family because two cultural views are clashing, and that fact goes unacknowledged. When caregivers and teacher bring cultural understanding to these dilemmas, they are able to engage in discussions with family members until there is a shared understanding of events, even if there is not agreement.

As powerful as these examples are, there are even more serious examples of ways in which caregiver lenses or cultural beliefs can affect the provision of services, and that is when deeply held biases affect expectations for children. For example, a teacher of migrant children was heard to say, “No wonder these children can’t speak English, their parents don’t keep them in one place long enough to give them that opportunity.” Not only does this statement demonstrate a lack of knowledge about the realities faced by migrant families, there are also implicit biases about the value of home language, about the value of family, and about the role that migrant workers play in the economic life of the community (Plous, 2003).

There is now fairly substantial evidence of the ways in which teacher bias appears to directly impact the performance of children of color. These biases come from deeply held socio-cultural beliefs and perpetuate a system of inequality and seem to result in significant under-achievement (Loury, 2002).

Understanding culture through understanding individuals

It is important to remember that there is a great deal of variation within any cultural community, and no descriptions can adequately describe the variations of that culture. While it is important to be familiar with the literature on different cultural communities, it is more important to keep in mind that we need to learn from families as individuals. If we do not, we may over-rely on stereotypes derived from textbooks or from prior interactions from persons of the same culture. In the end, hearing individual stories is what provides the best information about how to provide culturally responsive care and, through creating connections and challenging assumptions, is ultimately what changes hearts (Sanchez, 1999; Thorp, 1997).

Understanding the continued role of segregation in sustaining cultural stereotypes and reducing opportunities for natural interactions

Despite the more than fifty years that have elapsed since the landmark Supreme Court decision on *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education*, the United States continues to be segregated, in residential communities and in schools, along racial lines and along economic lines. Further, even when settings are nominally integrated, unwritten practices sustain an atmosphere of segregation (Tatum, 2000). As a result, few preservice and inservice teachers have had experiences with individuals from cultures other than their own. Because as a society we continue to be so segregated, an experiential component is essential in inservice and preservice training to move professionals out of their familiar cultural contexts and safe comfort zones and to increase their awareness of the stereotypes they may knowingly or unknowingly hold about individuals from cultural groups other than their own.

The Role of Critical Reflection in Exploring Issues of Culture and Language

Given the hidden but powerful role of culture in caregivers’ interactions with children and families, it is important to prepare personnel who are able to critically examine their practices through a cultural lens (Delpit, 1995; Derman-Sparks & Brunson Phillips, 1997). Thus, it is our position that underlying all of the preservice and professional development recommended practices is a core practice, that of critical reflection (Miller, Ostrosky,

Laumann, Thorp, Sánchez, & Fader-Dunne, 2003). Professional organizations, including the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), have recommended that personnel preparation programs prepare teacher candidates who are aware of the socio-cultural context of education, in particular the role of education in a democratic society and implications for ensuring equity and access for diverse young learners (Stayton, Miller, & Dinnebeil, 2003). They must also prepare students to consider the socio-historical influences on how disability is defined and how services for young children with disabilities are designed (Skrtic, 1995). These issues are equally important for the development of inservice professionals. For early care professionals to be able to consider these issues, inservice and preservice programs need to create contexts that enable them to embrace critical reflection so that they become better able to explore the cultural lens through which they view the world and to see how their cultural assumptions and experiences influence their interactions with children and families.

Several elements are central to providing support for practitioners in order for them to take on the task of critical reflection. These elements – acknowledging and embracing difficult issues, analyzing dilemmas for assumptions, considering the socio-cultural context of dilemmas, and exploring and imagining alternatives – are the components that make reflection “critical.” Brookfield (1987) suggests that two activities are central to critical thinking: (1) identifying and challenging assumptions and (2) exploring and imagining alternatives. He suggests, however, that embracing critical reflection can be an “almost Herculean act of will...” because, “If we are comfortable with our existence, ...we are imprisoned in our own histories and constrained by the inevitably narrow paradigms of thought and action we inhabit” (Brookfield, 1987, p. 91). Consider, then, that the majority of teachers are Caucasian Euro-Americans (Hamayan, 1990; Wald, 1996; Sleeter, 2001; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna & Flippin, 2004). Although perhaps through no active choice of their own, they have benefited from the cultural messages of the dominant culture and the implicit associated privileges (McIntosh, 1989). Becoming aware of one’s cultural heritage is the beginning point for critical reflection.

The Role of Home Language and the Link between Language and Culture

Researchers (Kidd, Sánchez, & Thorp, 2004; Kushner & Ortiz, 2000) have found that programs that prepare culturally responsive teachers have a focus on developing teachers’ deeper understanding of the role of language. Not only do such programs develop the understanding about the interdependence of language and culture, the role of the home language or dialect in identity formation, the second language acquisition process and levels of language proficiency, but they also prepare learners who are knowledgeable about how a community’s sociocultural story is linked to their literacies. These crucial areas of knowledge related to language, literacy, and culture are also the vehicles used by trainers to enter into crucial and sometimes difficult and controversial conversations with students.

Interdependence of language and culture

Language is the primary vehicle used by families to transmit their cultural lens and to socialize their children to be members of a particular cultural and linguistic community. Through routine interactions with members of their cultural community, children develop a

sense of who they are, where they come from, and what and who matters in their lives. Hence, through the use of their home language, including Black English Vernacular (BEV), also called Ebonics, young children develop the socio-emotional bond with their linguistic and cultural community and the appropriate communicative style, social competencies, and problem solving skills linked to their cultural identity. Unfortunately, many children experience a stigma attached to the language or dialect that they speak (Nieto, 2002). For example, it is still not uncommon for teachers to perceive BEV to be inferior or substandard, rather than seeing it as a language particular to the African American community that is a highly complex and systematic form of communication that richly represents that community (Brice Heath, 1983).

Role of home language in the family and community

Communities and families often struggle to maintain their home language. Young children, in particular, are susceptible to the powerful messages that dissuade the use of their home language in favor of the English language. Very young children often mistakenly pick up the message that their home language has minority status in society and is of little value (Sánchez & Thorp, 1998). Some young children may even view their home language with a sense of shame. Immigrant families report that when their children enter all English-speaking settings, the children often refuse to speak their home language at home or pretend in public that they do not know the language. Many report that their children often lose the ability to communicate with them and with the grandparents. Whereas, in generations past it would take three generations for immigrant families to lose their home language, research shows that in today's society language loss often occurs in the first generation. It is essential for early education providers to know how to support overall language development while also facilitating the process towards additive bilingualism, even when the early educator does not have fluency in the child's home language. Similarly, when working with young African American children who are speakers of BEV, teachers need to avoid hyper-correction of the dialect in order to avoid hindering overall language development (Smitherman, 1995).

Developmental process of second language acquisition

Understanding that there is a developmental sequence to the acquisition of English as a second language is also fundamental for early educators to know and to use for the development of culturally and linguistically responsive developmental goals and related learning activities. First, young children who are beginning the process of acquiring a second language often use their home language or dialect to communicate, even when placed in settings where staff perceive the need to speak using only standard English. At this level, children use the language that they know best to cope and convey meaning in the new setting. Often they are unaware that the home language or dialect is not understood. The use of the home language at this level should not be viewed as a refusal to use standard English or a behavior related to a disability or, in the case of BEV, a resistance to acquiring an additional communicative register or modality. Stopping children from using their home language or dialect is not an appropriate approach and may negatively impact overall language development and concept formation (Smitherman, 1994). Because language impacts thinking, and thinking impacts language (Vygotsky, 1986), children should be encouraged to use their strongest language to help them think through a process or solve problems. In this way, even at the basic level of English

language proficiency, the goal of the early educator to facilitate overall language and learning, and most importantly, communication, remains central.

In time, young children figure out that their home language does not work in the new setting. Often, after attempting to communicate in their home language with those who only speak English, they stop communicating all together. Sometimes, however, this silent or non-verbal period is viewed as a natural stage in the process of acquiring a new language, and is accepted by early educators. It is important for early educators working with linguistically diverse children to remember that language is social in nature, and children for the most part want to communicate with others. Setting up numerous powerful and engaging language opportunities for children to be involved with other children is imperative in the second language acquisition process. If they are left isolated from other children, on the assumption that they are in a silent period, the inherent social nature of language is not tapped as a primary motivator for acquiring English. On the other hand, it is also important that children not be required to produce while they are in this early part of the English as a second language acquisition sequence. Rather, their attempts to communicate should be acknowledged, and engagement should be invited.

Developmentally, children may need to concentrate on observing and listening to gain an understanding of how the new language works, but they should be closely monitored to ensure that they are still able to communicate their fears, needs, and desires through non-verbal means. Further, during a child's non-verbal period, attempts should be made to bring speakers of the child's home language into the educational setting to give the child the message that their language is important and of value to you as their teacher.

After the children gather the basic information about the new language, they begin rehearsing it (Tabors, 1997). During this next phase in the developmental sequence, children use telegraphic and formulaic language to communicate. Children can be seen naming classroom objects, repeating the alphabet, counting, singing or chanting repetitive phrases and also using formulaic expressions to begin to become involved with other children or with the adults in the classroom. You might hear "oh, no," "morning," "no, thank you," "lookit," "mine," "no way," or "bye, bye." This language use often gets them into group activities and their peers begin to see them as members of the group.

Throughout the process of acquiring English, the emotional well-being of a child needs to be viewed as an overarching goal. If no one, including their peers, speaks the child's home language, the child may experience social and linguistic isolation. This can result in the child feeling invisible, and cause the child to act out in frustration or withdraw from most group activities. Children who are acquiring a new language are in a social and linguistic quandary and their emotional well-being is jeopardized in the process. To acquire the new language, they need the social interaction of those who speak the language. Unfortunately, to be socially accepted, the children acquiring English need to be able to use English to interact with their English language peers (Tabors, 1997).

Mislabeling of English language learners

Young English language learners can be mistakenly mislabeled as having disabilities, and often as having language delays. Two myths or areas of concern surface

as common issues: one is that young children are like sponges and can pick up a second language easily and effortlessly, and the second is the view that having a language other than English is a disability in itself. Personnel need to know that the acquisition of English is a long process. Often early educators are amazed at the speed in which young children switch to English; however, this is only the tip of the English language iceberg (Cummins, 1989). The English language use they are observing is only the social language that they need for everyday interactions. In reality, young children who do not develop a strong foundation in their own language take much longer to master the academic language that is at the base of the language iceberg. The stronger language needed for advanced learning takes years to develop.

According to a major study conducted by Thomas and Collier (2002) involving 40,000 school-age children whose home language was other than English, the younger the linguistically diverse children were when placed in all English language setting, the longer was the process of developing the English academic language. They found that preschool or kindergarten children placed in all-English classrooms took up to seven to 10 years to achieve the 50th percentile on standardized achievement tests given in English, whereas those who were able to develop their home language until at least sixth grade matched the level of academic success of native English speakers after four to seven years of schooling. Switching to only English in the early preschool years was not advantageous for future learning.

The second misconception, that the second language learner is at risk, is one based on assumptions that are difficult to challenge without examining the basis for the view. It requires an understanding of the historical and political context for this view. In Texas, for example, it was against the law until the late 1960's to use a language other than English in a public building, and it was a criminal offense to teach in any other language, except as a foreign language in the upper grades. Spanish speaking children in Texas were routinely spanked or punished when they spoke their home language in school, even on the playground (Crawford, 1989). Children were commonly mislabeled as mentally incompetent because they spoke a language other than English (Crawford, 1989). The commonly held view of social scientists was that the home culture of non-English speakers was "culturally inferior" (Hakuta, 1986).

The view that bilingualism is a language disability, combined with a broader cultural deprivation theory, became a prevailing belief among many educators and in the larger society (Sánchez & Thorp, 1998). That this view has been accepted and internalized by practitioners means that significant work needs to be done to create a different set of understandings and experiences that draw on the strengths of communities and families and on a deeper understanding of language development.

Impact of home language loss

For many linguistically diverse young children, entering the education system often means making a linguistic and cultural shift and losing their home language. Rather than the acquisition of English becoming an additive experience by acquiring a new language and becoming bilingual or multilingual, many children have a subtractive experience and lose their home language. They lose the proficiency level in their home language that is

essential for communication across generations. Rather than viewing the home language as a deficit, informed practitioners understand that children's loss of the home language can have a long term negative impact on the relationship between children and family (Wong Fillmore, 1991). When a child can no longer communicate in the home language with the adults in their family and community, they lose the socioemotional and cognitive support that all children need in their lives. Culturally responsive teachers understand the importance of strengthening the emotional bonds between child and family and would not dissuade a family from using their home language, but would instead find ways to encourage it.

Literacy and linguistic diversity

It is not unusual for early childhood educators to ask families to read to their children in their home language as a way of sustaining language development. Although this is a common recommendation made to also support early literacy development, it is important to remember that what may appear to be a simple and easy activity for families is a challenge for some linguistically diverse families. Not only are books in other languages not abundantly available in all bookstores or retail outlets, but recommended activities may also not tap into the strength of the family and community. The oral tradition through storytelling remains for many communities the most entertaining and natural way of passing on literacy traditions (Sanchez, 1999).

Researchers (Perez, 1998; Moll, 1990; Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Zaragoza, 2002; Snow, 1993; McCaleb, 1994; Brice Heath, nd) have identified that the major task for educators is to find out about the cultural lives of linguistically diverse children, including speakers of BEV and other dialects, as well as about the educational resources or funds of knowledge they bring to the educational setting (Moll, 1990). The family and community's literacy traditions are embedded in their social context. If an early educator is unaware of that social context, they are unable to take advantage of the child's way of knowing and ways with words and therefore provide the continuity needed to further literacy and language development.

In Summary

Talking about the need to address diversity as the educational challenge of the 21st century is easy, but to effect change require that faculty, trainers, administrators and learners commit to a deeper, longer term, more painful process of critical reflection and continuous dialogic interaction with diverse cultural communities. The work cannot simply involve creating new courses or providing inservice training on "cultural competence," but rather must begin with self-reflection. Further, there is new content to be learned by faculty, trainers and administrators, as well as by learners. The issues of culture and language are complex and are related to all of us, not just to new immigrants or those who speak languages other than English. Thus, partnerships with diverse communities, families, and professionals are essential. As instructors of teachers of the 21st century, the potential is within us to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to transform programs to be more culturally and linguistically responsive and to welcome and nurture all children.

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