

PRINCIPLE 3:

Culturally relevant and diverse programming requires learning accurate information about the cultures of different groups and discarding stereotypes.



Highlights from the Original *Multicultural Principles* (1991)

- Stereotypes and misinformation interfere with effective Head Start program services.
- All program staff have an individual responsibility to acquire accurate information about cultural groups in their community.

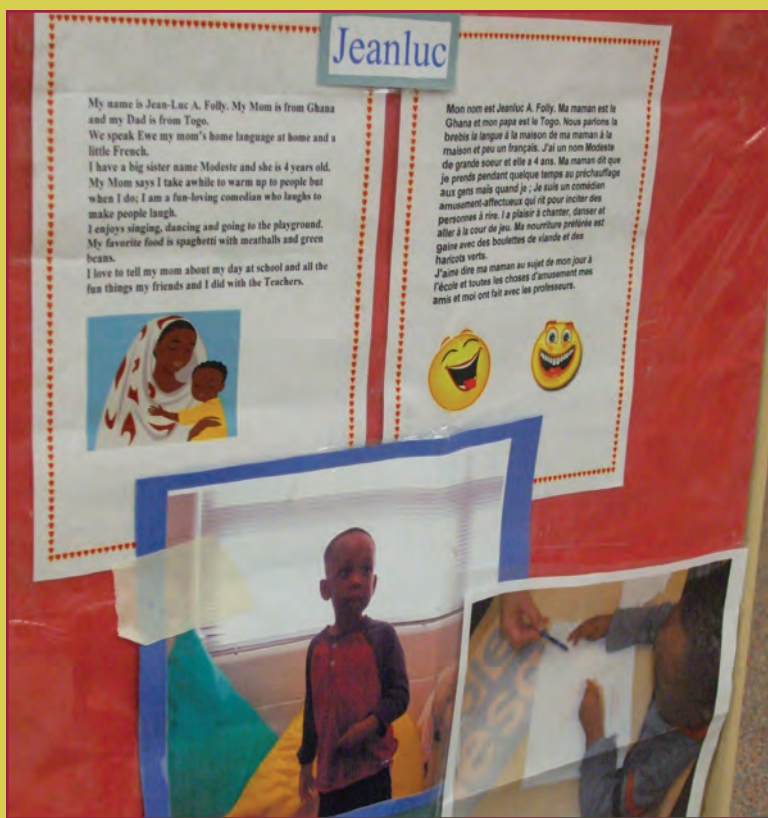
Research Review

Culture is an important factor in child development. Nevertheless, there are many challenges to understanding what culture is. Because we acquire our own culture start-

ing at birth, we are rarely challenged to *think about it directly* as we go about our daily lives. Moreover, when we do start to think about our own culture, we find ourselves confronted with a dynamic and complex reality.

As we have seen, there are many different ways to define, describe, or discuss culture. Yet there are some common features of these definitions that can help us develop an organized framework for understanding the different roles culture plays in child development. Common features include:

- The *capacity* for culture is innate or biological. However, cultural *knowledge* is not. Cultural knowledge is acquired through multiple processes that begin at birth (Rogoff 1990; Valsiner 1997).
- Culture involves shared meaning or understandings, including values and beliefs, within a group (Rogoff 2003).
- Culture is dynamic and *volitional* (Ovando & Collier 1998). That is, it evolves and changes over time as people *make choices* in the course of their daily lives, including if (and to what extent) they will participate in the shared meanings, values, and behaviors of their group.



Learning Accurate Information

Learning accurate information about cultures different from your own requires persistence, dedication, openness, and honesty. Exploring your own values, beliefs, and traditions—and learning how they impact you and the way you engage with the world—are preliminary steps to be taken before understanding others. In taking such steps, you also become more aware of your own stereotypes, assumptions, and biases (Sue 1998). There are many ways to pursue a higher level of self-awareness and reflect on your experiences and the cultural lens through which you view the world.

Gaining Knowledge

Increasing your cultural knowledge is essential. Families are rich sources of information for learning about their cultures. It is important to engage in meaningful dialogues with families. Key skills that are important to possess include the ability to listen to others who are culturally different, to actively learn about their experiences, and to respect differences in a nonjudgmental way (Derman-Sparks 1995).

There are many ways to learn about different groups of people. Reading information about a cultural group is one way (Phillips 1995), inquiring and learning about the various home practices of families (Gonzalez-Mena 1995) is yet another. It is equally important to seek out educational and multicultural training experiences (Derman-Sparks 1995). In addition, learning how culture can be integrated into the curriculum and classroom environment is essential (Derman-Sparks 1995).

Discarding Stereotypes

Stereotypes are distorted pictures of reality that broadly label one group as being a certain way. Stereotypes influence our perception, evaluation, judgment, and memory about individuals and events. People tend to learn stereotypes from the people around them—such as peers and family—or from the media and entertainment. Negative stereotypes are usually reinforced in similar ways.

Overcoming stereotypes and working to eliminate bias are continuous processes. It is essential to learn accurate information about different groups of people (e.g., race, religion, gender) through various ways (e.g., attending cultural events). It is important to remember that different does not mean abnormal or deficient. To counter negative stereotypes, seek out positive examples that cancel out or disprove the negative label. Doing this requires time, openness, and sensitivity.

In stereotyping, assumptions are made about a person on the basis of his or her group membership without learning whether the individual fits those assumptions. To avoid negative stereotyping in the Head Start environment, we should reflect on our own beliefs about all aspects of child rearing and early childhood education. We must acknowledge our own beliefs and biases about specific groups of people that may be unintentionally communicated to children and families.

Disabilities Services in Multicultural Settings

Services for children with disabilities are an integral part of all Head Start programs. Of course, these services are also influenced by culture and language. According to Harry and Kalyanpur (1994), the main challenge to program staff is to recognize that services for children with disabilities are based on cultural assumptions. These assumptions, in turn, influence service implementation in many important ways.

For example, cultures may differ in how they define a disability. That is, conditions or behaviors that are viewed as a disability in one culture may not be interpreted in the same way by members of another culture. Culture can influence:

- how parents respond to being informed that their child has a disability;

- how parents may adapt their parenting style in relation to their child's disability and to the goals they have for their children; and
- the ways in which parents communicate with program staff and other professionals who are involved in providing disabilities services.

Clearly, cultural assumptions and the ways in which they impact relationships and communication influence the identification and diagnosis of a disability and the provision of services for children and their families. Not surprisingly, these assumptions may become sources of misunderstanding and friction between program staff and families. Accordingly, Harry and Kalyanpur (1994) recommended that programs begin by developing a “sharp awareness” of this possibility (p. 161).

For example, program staff can avoid making assumptions about parents' behaviors. A parent's silence when informed that his or her child has been diagnosed with a disability may mean something different from what the staff person interprets it to be. In turn, a parent's hesitation to sign permission forms for further evaluation for a potential disability also may be misinterpreted. The authors encourage staff to examine their own cultural assumptions and to actively seek information from families at different times during service delivery, including families' interpretation of the disability and the values that underlie the preferences and practices of the family. The goal here is twofold: first, to work past assumptions in order to develop a productive form of cross-cultural communication with families; second, to address the challenge of “learning to collaborate within the parameters of different cultural frameworks” (Harry & Kalyanpur 1995, 161). The process is neither simple nor easy to implement. However, commitment to developing this approach is essential for programs to go beyond service delivery that is bound within a specific cultural framework.

Key Implications

There are two major implications of the information presented above. First, culture is not an *absolute* factor in children's development. That is, it is not the only factor that helps us understand how children develop. Other factors—including children's biological capacities, temperament, and individual preferences—also have a great deal of influence on how children develop. Although culture has an undeniable impact on human behavior, it is ultimately one of many influences upon human development.

Second, children's development is impacted by *choice*. Although all parents grow up within one or more cultures, culture is modified as parents make individual and specific choices about how to raise their children. For example, some parents may decide to raise their children within a specific religious tradition, whereas others may not. Some parents may insist that their children use the manners and social skills of their traditional culture, whereas others may encourage their children to adopt the social skills of the mainstream society in which they live.

VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

One grantee in Texas who served primarily Hispanic families found that a concentrated number of Hmong families had begun to enroll in its Head Start program. Some of the families ran small businesses, and others were employed in various agricultural jobs. One family in particular was known to enroll at least one child per year in the Head Start program. This family had reached 12 members in size; the majority were boys. This particular year, two brothers, ages 3 and 3.9 years, were enrolled. The teachers began to request assistance from the director as soon as they heard that additional boys from this family were to be enrolled, as they had worked with their brothers in previous years. The boys were highly active and boisterous in their play, often endangering themselves and other children by climbing and jumping from classroom structures. They were completely undeterred when teachers attempted to intervene during their unconventional play. Out of frustration, the teachers raised the question of cognitive developmental deficits, as evidenced by their inability to follow directions.

Numerous attempts by staff to discuss their concerns with the mother were met with a pleasant but silent demeanor. Unfortunately, staff interpreted her response as lack of understanding or a language barrier, or at best the behavior of a mother who was overwhelmed by a family beyond control. Home visits were offered, but the mother's lack of response was accepted as a refusal. The staff was burned out from working with the family, resigning themselves to the existing classroom climate.

It happened that a skilled clinician with knowledge of Hmong culture conducted a Child Study Team meeting for one of the boys of this family. He was exhibiting a severe deficit in expressive speech. The clinician could see and feel the frustration of the staff as they explained their screening results. A facilitated discussion by the clinician revealed that culturally specific values were contributing to the challenge the teachers were experiencing. Staff learned from the mother, who came to the meeting as the only representative of her family, that in this home and within the Hmong culture, high value was placed on energetic, vigorous play. A happy child is perceived as a direct extension of the parent. This explained the behavior exhibited by the older siblings formerly enrolled in Head Start. An "ah-hah moment" occurred for the staff when, at age 3, these Hmong boys required a lengthy home-to-school adjustment period. Additionally, the boys' behavior fell far below the age-appropriate expectations of preschoolers staff had worked with in the past.

During the meeting, a discussion about family culture evolved to a point at which the mother expressed gratitude to the Head Start program during the past years. The meeting opened doors to further communication and daily reports of progress, and the mother became involved in the classroom and supported her sons' transition into Head Start. Her English skills surprised the staff. The staff's willingness to learn about other cultures, in turn, helped the mother better appreciate the teacher's perspective on the importance of routines and transitions. It provided a rich, multicultural learning experience for staff who had worked at this Head Start program for many years.

Reflective Questions/Activities

1. Does your program's self-assessment process ask you to review and reflect upon your work as it relates to learning accurate cultural information and discarding stereotypes?
2. What opportunities do all program staff have to reflect upon their own experiences and beliefs, including assumptions and beliefs that are stereotypical and that may influence their work with children and families?
3. What opportunities do all program staff have to learn accurate information about families and communities within your service area?
4. Does your program value cultural information that, in addition to languages spoken in the home, includes background information about child rearing practices, meal traditions, family origin, educational, and socioeconomic characteristics?