PRINCIPLE 4:

Addressing cultural relevance in making curriculum choices and adaptations is a necessary, developmentally appropriate practice.

Highlights from the Original *Multicultural Principles* (1991)

- Children's learning is enhanced when their culture is respected and reflected in all aspects of the program.

- Programs must accommodate various learning styles of children.

- Children benefit from active, hands-on learning experiences that include frequent opportunities to make choices.

Research Review

As culture is an important context in which children develop, decisions related to curriculum should naturally take information about family culture and home language into account. This section will focus on the intersection of three important aspects of cultural influences on child development: (1) how parents raise their children, (2) how teachers teach, and (3) how children learn.

Culture has a major influence on the goals that adults have for a child. In some cultures, adults desire to see their child walking independently as soon as possible. You may have observed parents supporting their young children by both hands as they take tentative steps on a sidewalk or path. It is common to see infant or toddler classrooms equipped with objects to encourage children to crawl over and pull themselves up to a standing position, or to see teachers (or parents) extending their hands to encourage a child to take a few steps toward them. Helping infants to walk at an early age seems to be a goal of almost everyone in mainstream American culture. However, not all cultures share this outlook on early walking.

Valsiner (1997) pointed out that, among the Tuvan people of central Siberia, late walking by children is considered an indicator of a long life. In Tuvan culture, the "lateness" of walking is considered beneficial; therefore, adults do not facilitate early

walking experiences by their children. This is one example of how what seems "familiar" in one cultural setting may not be valued or prioritized in another culture.

Gonzalez-Mena (2001, 2008) described the various ways a culture can influence how adults—as either parents or teachers—relate to children. Because adults have goals for young children, they therefore take on a variety of *roles* in order to support children's development in ways that are consistent with these goals. This relationship—between goals and roles—can be observed in a number of daily activities, interactions, and curricular choices. For example, culture can shape how adults:

- carry out basic infant caregiving routines, such as sleeping, hygiene, and feeding;

- provide stimulation to their infant or toddler;

- understand, interpret, and relate to children's play;

- initiate and respond to children's communication, including nonverbal behaviors as well as speech;

- assess and address different types of conflicts (e.g., child–child, child–adult); and

- carry out socialization, guidance, and discipline of the child (Gonzalez-Mena 2008).

When Parents and Program Collide

In the Head Start of the twenty-first century, it is typical for program staff and enrolled families to come from different cultural backgrounds.

Cultural differences can lead to conflicts in many ways. For example, two Early Head Start teachers may disagree on practices for handling a baby, responding to crying, or feeding. Home visit staff may be conflicted over how and when to intervene in family arguments. Staff and parents in American Indian and Alaska Native or Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs may differ about the extent to which programs should support children's home or native language. Given the wide range of cultural ideas, it is not surprising that adults can have differences that are firmly ingrained within them.

As noted previously, adults may disagree over *practices*—that is, ways of working with or caring for young children. Gonzalez-Mena (1992, 2001, 2008) indicated that these disagreements may be *cultural* or *individual*. In the first case, adults from different cultural backgrounds may find that their familiar ways of working with children are different; in

the second case, adults within the same culture can disagree. In situations of conflict between program staff and parents (either cultural or individual), Gonzalez-Mena identified four possible outcomes:

1. All sides gain understanding, negotiate, and/or compromise, leading to resolution of the conflict.

2. Program staff understand the parents' perspective(s) and change their practices.

3. Parents take on the perspective of the program staff and change their practices.

4. No resolution is reached (here, the conflict may continue or intensify; or both sides can cope with the differences).

Of course, conflicts can occur over numerous issues. To help program staff make progress, Gonzalez-Mena challenges them to question their own assumptions about child development practices (e.g., "My way of thinking about X is not the only way to think about it. My way of doing Practice Y is not the only way to work with the child."). Once this commitment to test one's own assumptions is in place, two goals for a conflict situation are: (1) to minimize (or eliminate) extreme differences in practices; and (2) to resolve the situation for the benefit of the child. Program staff are encouraged to take a child-centered look at any situation of conflicting practices by asking the following:

1. How does the family view a particular practice?

2. How does each program staff person view a particular practice?

3. How does the child respond to the specific practice?

The point is to begin and continue to dialogue with families and to exchange information with the goal of resolving the conflict for the benefit of the child. The "bottom line" is really: What is in the best interest of the child? Readers are encouraged to review the works of Janet Gonzalez-Mena cited in this document's References section for more specific guidance on implementing these strategies.

Key Implications

Cultures shape the goals or desired outcomes valued within a particular society. Parents and teachers may have different goals that translate into real and practical differences as parents and families seek to raise their children within a particular set of ideas. Adults' goals for children are reflected in the numerous ways in which they support children's development.

By learning more about the goals that parents have for their children, and about the types of behaviors or practices that parents prioritize and implement as they raise their children, program staff can more easily match the learning experiences of the classroom to those of the home. For example, if a teacher is concerned that a 3-year-old in her

class is not skilled with using a fork, she should first find out if this is a goal of the family. Do they scoop their food at home using spoons? Do they use chopsticks? Do they feed the child? It is best for the teacher to check what the family practices and goals are before starting to individualize for this child regarding learning how to eat with a fork.

One way of making developmentally appropriate curriculum decisions is to learn about the lives, beliefs, and interests of the children and their families. The information can then be used to inform the range of services provided by the program. The next section describes how children's "background knowledge" can be gathered and used to support language development in either the first or the second language.

Background Knowledge

As discussed previously, children acquire cultural knowledge from the day they are born. Put another way, children enter Early Head Start and Head Start with understandings already acquired from interactions and experiences with family and community members. The term *background knowledge* refers to the specific factual and social information that children can have at any age.

At any age, children acquire not only cultural knowledge and language skills but also conceptual knowledge. Some examples of conceptual knowledge include:

- understanding the uses of objects (e.g., a map is used to find locations),
- quantity (how many items are in a group),
- directions (up/down or north/south), or
- properties of objects (e.g., a cork will float in water but a key will not).

These insights are an additional source of information for planning and implementing daily learning experiences within the classroom.

Background knowledge plays a key role in children's acquisition of a second language. Familiar objects and concepts that the child has acquired from family and community members in the home language—when used in second language settings—can facilitate learning, as the child can focus on the new vocabulary involved. Background knowledge "helps determine how cognitively demanding a subject is," and can be considered a context for second language acquisition (Freeman & Freeman, 1992, 28). Background knowledge can also include specific, personally meaningful experiences such as travel, observations of family routines, or knowledge of parents' employment. This discussion about the context of language learning is explored in more detail in Principle 6.

Key Implications

The role of background knowledge in children's learning emphasizes the importance of ongoing child assessment in all Head Start programs, especially those in diverse service areas.

Teachers can use ongoing assessment procedures (e.g., observations of children in the classroom, observations during home visits, conversations with parents) in order to understand the background knowledge of individual children. By taking into account "where children are coming from" (i.e., understanding children's experiences, lifestyle, and what children already know), teachers are in a position to plan a curriculum that fully supports children's learning.
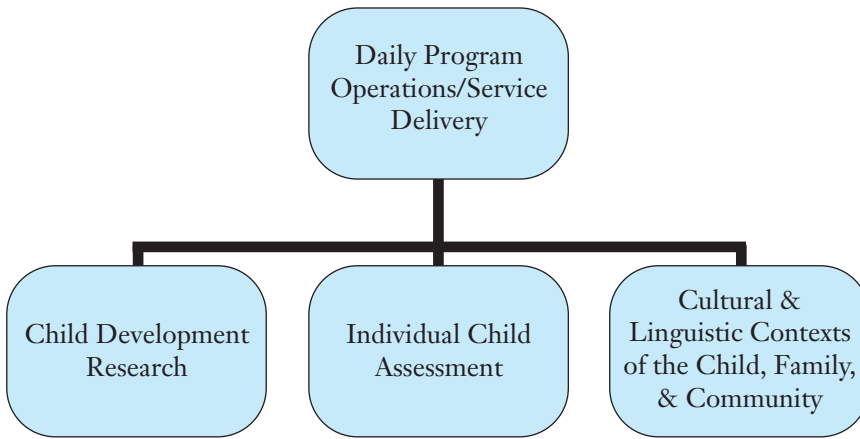
Culturally Responsive Practices; Culturally Appropriate Services

Since the publication of the *Multicultural Principles* in 1991, the field of early childhood education has been marked by sustained interest in, and discussions of, the intersection of child development, family culture, and home language(s) with program policies and practices. For example, in 1996, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a Position Statement entitled *Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity: Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education*.

In 1997, NAEYC released its revised publication on *developmentally appropriate practices*. This term was formulated by professionals making decisions about the well-being and education of children, on the basis of at least three important pieces of information:

1. *What is known about child development and learning*: Knowledge of age-related human characteristics that permits general predictions within an age range about what activities, materials, interactions, or experiences will be safe, healthy, interesting, achievable, and challenging to children.

2. *What is known about the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child in the group*: [Necessary] to be able to adapt and be responsive to inevitable individual variation.

3. *Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live*: [Necessary] to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for the participating children and their families. (Bredekamp & Copple 1997, 8–9)

With this information, programs are expected to use knowledge of children's cultural and social settings as a key component of decisions about teaching environments. In 2009, NAEYC released its third revision of the publication (Bredekamp & Copple 2009). In this most recent version, the three types of knowledge identified in the 1997 publication remain. The decision-making process for developmentally appropriate practices is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Sources of Developmentally Appropriate Practices.

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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │    Daily Program    │
                    │ Operations/Service  │
                    │      Delivery       │
                    └─────────────────────┘
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│Child Development│   │Individual Child│   │   Cultural &      │
│   Research     │   │  Assessment   │   │Linguistic Contexts │
│               │   │               │   │of the Child, Family,│
│               │   │               │   │   & Community     │
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Curriculum in Multicultural Classrooms

The term *culturally responsive practices* has been used to refer to the implementation of effective teaching practices in diverse early education settings. One source describes culturally responsive practices as *teaching to and through* the strengths of children who are culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (Gay 2000, 29). This term implies the integration of assessment and curriculum practices: program staff must learn about the individual strengths, abilities, and preferences of each of the children enrolled in their program, and then find ways to plan and implement a curriculum that is based upon these strengths. For example, teachers can use home visits to learn about the child's strengths and interests, to observe ways that families interact with their child, and to begin a dialogue with families about their goals for the child.

Classroom Materials

In her 1995 book, *The Right Stuff for Children Birth to 8*, Martha Bronson offers detailed suggestions for selecting play materials that are safe, appropriate, and supportive of play and development. It is relevant to note here that classroom materials can potentially depict people in stereotypical ways or only contain token images of culturally diverse people. Therefore, the challenge is to provide classroom materials that reflect *all* children, families, and adults in the program, and to eliminate stereotypical or inaccurate materials from daily use. For example, books and dramatic play materials should reflect diversity of gender roles, racial and cultural backgrounds, special needs and abilities,

and a range of occupations and ages. Books and environmental print should also represent the different languages of children in the classroom.

The challenge for programs is to establish systems and procedures that take the cultural and linguistic contexts of the children into account. Once in place, these classroom materials should be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that the classrooms reflect all enrolled children without stereotyping. Programs are encouraged to seek information from parents, family members, and knowledgeable members of the community for their input in equipping classrooms to reflect cultures and languages in respectful ways.

Finally, encouraging children's language and cognitive growth does not preclude the responsibility to support each child's sense of well-being, the formation of his or her identity, and feelings of security. A consensus within the research is that effective environments for children support *all* domains of development, and that environments associated with learning outcomes should also provide strong support for social–emotional development (Hart & Risley 1995, 1999; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998). With this in mind, the developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate environment mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the children it serves (Gestwicki 1995). The following are some specific strategies suggested by Derman-Sparks (1989):

1. Use images in abundance that represent all children, families, and staff in your program.

2. Use images of children and adults from the major ethnic groups in your community and in U.S. society.

3. Use images that accurately reflect people's current daily lives in the U.S. during work and recreational activities.

4. Offer a balance among different cultural and ethnic groups.

5. Provide a fair balance of images of women and men doing "jobs at home" and "jobs outside home." Provide images of older people of various backgrounds doing different activities.

6. Provide images of differently abled people of various backgrounds at work and with their families.

7. Use images of diversity in family styles, such as single mothers and fathers, and extended families that are multiracial and multiethnic.

8. Use images of important individuals, past and present, and that reflect diversity.

9. Exhibit artwork—prints, sculpture, and textiles—by artists of various backgrounds.

VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

Here are examples of two "voices" that support Principle 4, one an Early Head Start program and one a Head Start program.

In one Early Head Start program in Massachusetts, when a mother from Ghana who spoke very little English brought her 9-month-old daughter to our classroom, we had some concerns. The baby could not roll over or sit up by herself. At first, communication was difficult, and the mother seemed unhappy with the care her daughter was receiving. She appeared unconcerned about the delay. The teacher was trying very hard to build a relationship with this mother, but was having difficulty.

Through informal daily exchanges, the teacher built a relationship with the mother while caring for the baby. Sometimes the teacher would send notes home, and the mother's friend would translate. The mother would then bring notes back. For home visits and conferences, they found an interpreter who would facilitate communication. The teacher learned that this mother used a long piece of fabric to keep the baby wrapped to her body most of the time because she came from a family where you don't put a baby down on the ground.

Once this important piece of information was understood, the teacher was able to help the mother feel more comfortable about the care her baby was receiving. She explained why they put babies on the ground for tummy time. The teacher asked the mother's permission to implement plans she had made for the baby. If the mother did not want the baby on the floor, would it be okay if she was on a foam mat with someone right next to her? That was okay with the mother, but she was concerned that the baby needed to be held more often. Because the infant room had many volunteers, it was easy to meet this request. Teachers and volunteers made efforts to hold the baby as much as possible and do it in ways that would support her gross motor development. They played bouncing games on their laps, let her lie across their legs on her stomach, and gave her large objects to hold onto. The program was able to secure another foam mat, similar to the classroom mat they used, so that the mother could use it at home.

Through communication, patience, and an open mind, the teacher built a relationship with the mother and created opportunities for this baby to improve her motor skills. In turn, the mother shared her beliefs with the teacher that babies should be frequently held. Respecting this practice, the teacher incorporated it into her lesson planning.

In a rural community in the United States, both men and women are absent from their jobs on the first day of hunting season. The majority are hunters who hope to fill their freezers with meat in order to feed their families during the winter. The Head Start program experiences the arrival of hunting season with the arrival of young children at Head Start carrying toy guns, just like Daddy and Mommy.

Program administrators and teachers alike have spent countless hours discussing how their programs can restrict gun play in a community that depends on the use of guns to put food on the table. At one Head Start site, experienced teachers anticipated the arrival of children with their guns by setting up a receiving area just inside the center's doors where the guns were to be "checked at the door." Each family was greeted by a staff member who explained procedures, just as they used to have to do in the old days. Each child received a paper ticket in exchange for their gun along with the assurance that the gun would be returned at the end of the day when they went home.

At another site, teachers used this event as an opportunity to educate the young children about the requirements of gun ownership and handling. The teachers' lesson plans included teaching the children how to apply for legal ownership of a gun, gun regulations, and gun safety. After the children completed these lessons, the teachers issued each child a certificate of attendance.

Reflective Questions/Activities

1. How are home visits by teachers or home visitors conducted? Is time taken during home visits to observe how children, parents, and other family members relate to each other?

2. Is time taken during home visits to ask parents about knowledge and information that are familiar to the child?

3. How are teachers' observations of children in the classroom used to identify children's background knowledge? As the teacher gains additional information about what children know and do, are classroom learning experiences planned with this information in mind?

4. How do program staff use informal conversations with parents (e.g., encounters in the hallway or during drop-off or pick-up times) to learn more about the child?

5. How are parents included in curriculum planning? Are parents invited to share information about their child's interests and favorite activities? Is this information used in curriculum planning?

6. Does your program have a procedure for reviewing conflicts over practices between staff and parents? Do staff have opportunities to discuss and role-play different scenarios and to practice their skills at dialogue with families?

Additional Reflective Questions

Given the importance of cultural and social contexts to children's development, how do we as a program . . .

1. Begin information-sharing and create opportunities for dialogue with parents and family members during our initial contacts with them?

2. Find ways for parents, family members, and community partners to share their expertise, ideas, preferences, and information about their cultural backgrounds to the extent that they choose to do so?

3. Develop our expertise in developing and sustaining dialogue with families, especially when there are questions or conflicts over program practices?

4. Organize and integrate information across staff; that is, do different staff working with a family have oportunities to share, discuss, and integrate information in order to produce more effective program services?

5. Are our partnerships and dialogue with families and community partners centered on the well-being of the children enrolled in our program? What practices and strategies do we have in place for when staff and parents are in disagreement?