

## PRINCIPLE 5:

*Every individual has the right to maintain his or her own identity while acquiring the skills required to function in our diverse society.*



### Highlights from the Original *Multicultural Principles* (1991)

- Children need the cultural identities of their families to be recognized and honored.
- Children need to learn a variety of skills in order to function effectively in a diverse society.
- Children have the right to grow up in environments where differences are expected and respected.

### Research Review

Like culture, our identity is dynamic and complex. Our identity is connected to our work and activities, our families and heritage, our ideas and beliefs, and our choices and circumstances. Beginning at birth, young children develop their identities over time, in the context of family and community relationships.

As noted in Principle 4, one way that culture shapes children's development is through the goals that adults have for children as well as through the roles that adults take on in order to accomplish these goals. This cultural shaping process will naturally have an impact on how members of a cultural group come to develop a personal and social identity. Although a full review of the literature on identity development is beyond the scope and purpose of this document, it should be noted that some researchers have investigated the connection between the cultural identities of immigrant groups in the United States and school achievement.

One common assumption is that traditional cultures "get in the way" of school success. Immigrants and minorities, it is argued, must "do away with" the culture of their families and take on the cultural forms of their schools. This assumption was disputed by a

team of researchers who compared levels of assimilation into U.S. culture with Indochinese children's school achievement:

*The most successful Indochinese families appear to retain their own traditions and values.* By this statement we are in no way devaluing the American system. The openness and opportunity it offers have enabled the Indochinese to succeed in the U.S. even while maintaining their own cultural traditions. (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore 1992, 41)

Another finding is that cultural identity is connected to literacy development. Altarriba (1993) framed the issues as follows:

The existing evidence . . . uniformly suggests that [reading] comprehension is facilitated to the degree that the reader is culturally familiar with the material being read. Subjects experience interference when culturally unfamiliar material is presented for processing. (p.381)

In other words, culturally responsive practices not only can be used to inform curriculum and specific teaching practices aimed at early literacy but also are necessary to support children's academic progress. In this view, programs do not have to choose between services that promote academic development and those that are culturally responsive. Instead, programs are encouraged to improve upon culturally responsive policies and service delivery in order to support fully children's learning and development (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000).

### **Key Implications**

One key implication is that family culture is a source of strength, especially for young children. Therefore, programs should develop self-assessment procedures to examine program systems and services.

### **Family and Culture: Sources of Strength**

Families play a crucial role in forming a child's identity and helping that child determine his or her place in the world (Jackson, Taylor, & Chatters 1997). For example, among African American Head Start families, it was found that mothers' positive identification with their race was significantly related to children's social competence (Halgunseth et al. 2005). Self-esteem, positive psychological functioning, and achievement have all been associated with a person's connection or identification with his or her racial and cultural group.

There are many other ways that culture can serve as a source of strength. Informal adoption by extended kin, godparents, or friends is a culture-bound practice among many Puerto Rican, African American, and Native American families (Garcia-Preto 2005; Moore-Hines & Boyd-Franklin 2003). Furthermore, extended ethnic kin

networks and social networks have been found to enhance self-esteem (Keefe & Padilla 1987). Research has also found that many Hispanics and Asian Americans seek personal support networks, economic opportunities, and social acceptance within ethnic communities (Vega & Rumbart 1991).

According to the *Multicultural Principles* (1991), the culture of each family must be recognized and embraced for its unique characteristics, as well as how it serves as a source of strength in supporting children's development. It is important to view families as having their own distinctive culture, structures, and practices that can be different from what we are familiar with. However, these differences do not make the family or the children deficient, but just the opposite—a knowledgeable and rich resource that programs should take advantage of as they plan and implement their program.

### VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

An American Indian Head Start program located on a reservation in Wisconsin operates dual-language classrooms for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children in order to preserve the Ojibwa language and culture as well as to support English language acquisition. Members of the community who are most fluent in the language provide language instruction to program staff on a regular basis. The staff carry out many activities to support language preservation, including implementation of culturally responsive play and learning experiences within classrooms.

For example, toddler and preschool classrooms feature word walls that present basic vocabulary in Ojibwa and English. In addition, teachers have created storyboards that are familiar to the children. In one classroom, the board includes a forest scene in which there are trees, plants, ponds, and small animals. In one spot in the scene, a tree stump indicates that a beaver had chewed down the tree. The storyboard is a place where children can play and use language to describe familiar settings and events. During children's play, teachers have the opportunity to observe children's language use, to extend and elaborate upon children's utterances, and to introduce new vocabulary in either Ojibwa or English.

In a related activity, teachers cover tables with butcher paper during free playtime.



Using various colored marking pens, the teachers outline settings that are familiar to the children, including Lake Superior, train tracks, and trees. The teachers then bring small toys to the setting, such as toy trains, small animals, stickers, hats, and other dress-up clothing. What began as a teacher-initiated activity can then be turned over to the children, to allow them to develop different ideas in their play. Like the storyboard activity, this type of pretend play allows the children to direct their own activity, to develop complex stories about the setting and actions involved, and to use either of their languages to express themselves.

### **Reflective Questions/Activities**

1. Observe the book area within a classroom. To what extent do the books reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic heritage of all children enrolled in the classroom? How do the arrangement and decoration of the area invite children from various backgrounds to enter and select books?
2. How familiar are you with the stories that the children in your program are told or have read to them by their parents or other family members? If you are familiar, how do you use this information to plan a curriculum? If not, how can you obtain this information?
3. Does your program have a formal policy to ensure that teaching staff or volunteers read to children in the home language and in English? Are books in the classroom offered in the languages spoken by all enrolled children?
4. How are parents invited to share their culture(s) with children, families, or program staff? How are parents invited to share with program staff what makes their family “feel at home”?
5. What specific indicators and systems can your program identify that demonstrate respect and support for the cultures of all enrolled families?