

PRINCIPLE 8:

Multicultural programming for children enables children to develop an awareness of, respect for, and appreciation of individual cultural differences.



Highlights from the Original *Multicultural Principles* (1991)

- Diversity within classrooms and home-based socialization experiences can be the starting points for planned learning experiences and discussions about individual differences.
- Cultural information should be integrated into everyday environments and learning experiences rather than taught as an occasional activity.
- An important goal is to develop children's capacity to communicate effectively with people who are different from themselves.

Research Review

The increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in many Head Start programs reflects long-term demographic trends in the United States. Although all people are rooted in culture, it is also important to recognize that people are also individuals. Within any cultural group, there may be differences in how children are raised. It is, therefore, important to avoid thinking of all members of one culture as “the same.” Instead, we must work to understand and appreciate each child and each family for their uniquenesses.

Cultural Transmission: The Role of Routines

Valsiner (1997) offered one explanation of how cultural and individual differences are connected. He argued that feeding and mealtimes provide the “microcosm within which cultural patterning of behavior begins and where the (individual) child is confronted with cultural knowledge about the world” (p. 214).

During mealtimes, adults purposefully limit some of the children's actions and promote others, thus shaping (not determining) future development. Parents and family

members model and explain if and how the child may feed himself, what and how much the child may eat, and how food is prepared, served, and stored.

According to Valsiner (1997), children are exposed to cultural information at every meal. The information is transmitted both directly and indirectly. For example, as children eat they are provided with direct instructions (e.g., sit up straight, chew with your mouth closed, eat everything on your plate). Direct instruction may also convey information related to religious, community, social, and other family contexts.

However, direct instruction is not the only way in which culture is communicated. Within the structured occasion of meals, family members indirectly expose children to different ways of thinking and behaving (Valsiner 1997, 226). In these instances, and often before much direct instruction takes place, children are exposed to ways of acting and interacting by observing family members and others. During mealtimes, even very young children come to see what is done, how, and by whom. Young children may:

- observe food preparation and household tasks;
- take part in conversations and hear their parents express opinions;
- be exposed to stories, humor, and grief;
- receive religious instruction;
- be instructed in polite forms of communication and behavior; and
- observe and overhear comments about community events.

The key component of this indirect exposure to cultural information becomes the child's active role in taking it in. That is, a child does not take in information "verbatim,"



nor does he or she access all information in the same way. Instead, children process information as it comes to them, actively “making sense” of what they see and hear. Even very young children compare observations from one environment with those from other environments.

Key Implications

Cultures differ in many ways in their approach to feeding and mealtimes. The culture can provide structure to these events as well as initiate children into practices and procedures defined as “acceptable.” Nevertheless, individuals within a culture make their own choices about how to live, how to act, what values to hold, and what beliefs are personally important.

A key finding within the research literature is that children acquire cultural information through different pathways. At times, children receive direct instruction in cultural rules and expectations, such as mealtime behavior. At other times, children acquire cultural information through their own observations of family members (as well as extended family). Children also observe the teachers and other adults in their Head Start program, adults who provide child care, and members of their communities. Simply put, all adults are role models when they are in the same environment as children. Therefore, the implication of cultural transmission for program staff is that they must develop ways of communicating with families so that knowledge of their daily lives can be used to inform decisions about the classroom environment.

VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

A Head Start classroom teacher in Kansas shared that throughout all her years of teaching she had not thought much about her heritage or her family’s culture. One day she was reading a story to the children about an Italian grandmother who joyfully prepared dinner for her family. It was a moment of epiphany for her. The story brought her “home.” The connection made to her family and the pride she felt about her Italian heritage suddenly surfaced. She stated that prior to that moment she did not understand how powerful multicultural programming could be for children.

A week later she chose a storybook about an American Indian child, as there was one child of American Indian heritage in her class. At that time, there was very little representation of the child’s culture in the curriculum. She shared that the child immediately approached her after she read the story. They spent some time looking at the pictures in the book and revisiting the pages that interested the child. The teacher sent the book home with the child and encouraged her to share it with her family. This simple gesture resulted in a stronger relationship between the Head Start center and the family. During the next month, the child’s mother came to the classroom as a volunteer, and her parents came together to the parent meeting the following month.

Reflective Questions/Activities

1. If your program serves infants and toddlers: How does your program gather information about the caregiving practices of families? For example, how do you understand how a family feeds its child, puts the child to sleep, or holds the child?
2. For preschool-age children, how do your classrooms reflect the cultures of the children enrolled? How do daily learning experiences allow children to learn about and develop respect for other cultures?
3. What opportunities do parents have to form relationships with other parents and to develop new understandings of individuals from different cultural groups with the community?