

PRINCIPLE 9:

Culturally relevant and diverse programming examines and challenges institutional and personal biases.



Highlights from the Original *Multicultural Principles* (1991)

- Program systems and services should be reviewed for institutional bias.
- Skills to deal with bias must be taught to children.

Research Review

One challenge to understanding culture involves the way we acquire it. Rogoff (1990) posed the problem this way: We are “blind” to our own culture because our way of thinking and living, built up over a lifetime, has become a habit. Although all humans live within one or more cultures, our cultural knowledge is often subconscious. As much of what we do on a daily basis (e.g., working, eating, relaxing, raising children)

involves routines, we rarely consciously think of culture as shaping our behavior at all.

Another challenge to understanding culture involves the personal, social, and emotional aspects of cultural information and ways of living. Our way of thinking and living, built into habits since childhood, naturally lead us to think that our way of doing things is the “right way.” We tend to notice culture when we encounter differences, and our reaction is often to confirm our own expectations and ideas.

Key Implications

Our personal cultural backgrounds influence how we think, the values that we hold, and the practices we use to support children's development. In addition, our ways of acquiring culture, going back to our earliest childhood, influence how we approach thinking and talking about culture. Although a full review of resources is beyond the scope of this document, programs are encouraged to develop and implement long-term approaches and processes to address these important issues.

VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

In Florida, a Head Start grantee tried to ensure that all classrooms were staffed with bilingual teachers, but found that this was becoming more difficult because of the increasing needs of culturally diverse classrooms and family child care homes. Although the program had developed written policies on language use years ago, the policies focused only on English- and Spanish-speaking children and families. Since then, multiple languages had come to be represented by the program's enrolled families, who were from different regions of Mexico (e.g., Mixteco, Huastec, Trique) and other countries (e.g., Cambodia, Laos). There was growing confusion about the appropriateness of introducing a new language when young children had yet to master their first language. There was even more confusion about how to support children who spoke a language none of the program staff could speak. In addition, many parents, not understanding the full implications of losing one's first language, expressed their strong desire for their children to hear only English at the Head Start program.

As the program began to reach out to volunteers and staff who were from the same cultures of the children and who spoke their languages, tensions began to rise within the program. The English-speaking staff confronted the program administrator because they were uncomfortable when other employees were speaking Spanish or other languages in the staff lounge. They did not see the need for this outside of the classroom.

Program managers knew they needed to address the situation quickly. They decided to hold several staff forums to discuss the value of bilingualism and how communication in both languages in and outside of the classroom gave equal status to both groups.

The program management then invited a round table of expert consultants to meet numerous times with education coordinators and directors, program managers, and other key staff representative of varied cultures and backgrounds. Convening these meetings set in motion a series of highly reflective and research-based discussions about experiences that made a real difference in the lives of those around the table. One goal was to identify best practices that would support the developmental needs

of children who were learning their first language and experiencing their own culture while also in the midst of multicultural educational experiences and English learning. An additional goal was to articulate a program-wide philosophy and practice that embraced diversity, including addressing how adults use language in and outside of the classroom.

The result of the meetings over a 6-month period created a consistent understanding and buy-in of what should be contained in the grantee's Policies and Procedures on Language and Multicultural Principles.

The program staff worked to develop policies and procedures that included:

1. a statement of philosophy, in which statements about the program's beliefs about first- and second-language acquisition were put together on one page;
2. detailed statements about key research evidence of first- and second-language acquisition as well as early literacy development;
3. guidance for center managers and directors on hiring practices;
4. information on creating program–parent partnerships in order to support children's development to the fullest extent;
5. information on interpersonal communication between staff members, with parents, and throughout the program, including clarification on the use of languages other than English in working with children and throughout program services and systems; and
6. specific guidance on how the program supports (through trained volunteers, staff, community members, etc.) teachers and classrooms when there are multiple languages present.

The revised policies and procedures, once finalized in draft, were then presented to the agency's Parent Policy Council and Board of Directors for review and approval. Both groups were enthusiastic about the revision process, asked many questions, and gave their full support for the work.

Reflective Questions/Activities

1. How do the preservice and in-service trainings in your program address and provide opportunities and information for staff to develop their abilities to examine and challenge institutional and personal biases?

2. Think about what your response would be if a parent in your program tells you that his or her
 - 3-month-old is ready to begin toilet training;
 - 1-year-old should not be encouraged to walk;
 - 2-year-old should be fed by teachers;
 - 3-year-old drinks from a bottle;
 - 4-year-old should have access to coloring books daily; or
 - 5-year-old should not “waste time” in pretend play.

How might your response influence your future relationship and communication with the family? How might your response influence your future work with the child?

3. Does your program incorporate reflective supervision practices so that staff have opportunities to reflect on their efforts to involve families in Head Start systems and services?