



ESSENTIAL TO QUALITY: Supporting Cultural Competence

IN THE Department of Early Education and Care Regulated Workforce

2005 SCHOTT FELLOWS

Lori Cox
Assistant Director,
Countdown to
Kindergarten

Marilyn Hughes
Director of Head Start,
Cape Cod Child
Development Center

Marie Enochty
Coordinator, Cape &
Islands Early Childhood
Resource Center, Cape
Cod Children's Place

Wendy Luk
Program Director, Family
Child Care, Boston
Chinatown Neighborhood
Center

Marcia Farris
Executive Director,
MA Association for the
Education of Young
Children

Joseph Martin
Executive Director,
Pakachoag Acres Day Care

Maureen A. Ferris
Executive Director,
Massachusetts Legislative
Children's Caucus

Yvette Rodriguez
Director of Operations,
Inquilinos Borricuas en
Accion

Sharon Scott-Chandler
Vice President, Action
for Boston Community
Development

Robyn Carter
Network Director,
The Home for Little
Wanderers

Lisa Sockabasin
Nurse Epidemiologist,
North American Indian
Center

Nicole St. Victor
Director of Early
Childhood Services,
Catholic Charities

STAFF

Valora Washington, PhD
Executive Director

Tamara Bates
Associate

Attention to Diversity is Essential

The demographics of our nation are changing rapidly. Researchers predict that by 2010, no single ethnic or racial group will constitute a majority of the population. Democracy will require an unprecedented level of cooperation, communication, and teamwork among people who are different.¹ Massachusetts, too, faces rapid growth in the diversity of its citizens, a large number of whom are young children.

Therefore, diversity issues are highly relevant to the new Department of Early Education and Care's (EEC) mission of overseeing and supervising the administration of a high-quality system of public and private early education and care. What is the adequacy of the training requirements for the EEC's regulated programs, and regulations for other programs serving children birth to eight? Does Massachusetts require that educators understand the impact of a young child's culture on their approaches to learning?

State of the State

In addressing the scope of diversity issues in Massachusetts, we found that:

Demographically, Massachusetts has changed dramatically over the past 15 years. The Asian and Latino population grew by over 50 percent. African Americans make up 8 % of the population. According to the latest census figures (2000), 74% of Massachusetts children ages 3-5 were non-Hispanic white; 26% were Hispanic, African American, Asian, or multi-racial.²

Our early education workforce is diverse; therefore there are many instances where children are being taught by teachers of different cultures. A recently released Wellesley College study reports that 10% of the workforce is Black or African American, 13% is Hispanic/Latino, 2% are Asian, Pacific Islander, 3% are multiracial and the rest are White, non-Hispanic. In positions of leadership, 91% of Center Directors are White, non-Hispanic.³

Teacher training in diversity and cultural competence seems inadequate:

- There are no requirements regarding cultural competency in the EEC licensing regulations for working with children from birth through age 12.
- The large majority of the EEC regulated workforce has limited access to multicultural education.

Past practice suggests that specific training requirements around cultural competence within the EEC regulations would provide the necessary impetus to develop and present these trainings

What do we mean by cultural competence?

Culture plays a crucial role in the formation of one's identity. Culture "is a complex whole, which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of the society... It is the essence of who we are, the core of the values and beliefs that we hold deeply." In the context of early childhood education, the understanding and respect of children's cultural heritage is a foundation stone for their social/emotional well-being as well as their intellectual development. A lack of understanding of a child's developing cultural identity can irrevocably harm their understanding of who they are in the world.

For the most part, the leadership and direct care staff, do not reflect the racial and ethnic heritage of the children in their care. Unless well-educated or experienced in cultural appropriateness and sensitivity, many early childhood professionals fail to grasp the complexities that surround communication with families from different cultures. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement on diversity recommends that early childhood educators be professionally prepared in the areas of culture, language, and diversity.⁴

Janet Gonzalez-Mena in her book, *Multicultural Issues in Child Care*, states that culturally competent care requires that:

- Adults in children's lives respect each other.
- Adults in children's lives work to understand each other's perspectives.



- Caregivers and parents understand how programs and family values may differ and work together toward blending differing value systems.⁵

Culturally competent care is not about what music to play at naptime. It is about understanding that culture influences everything about the child and the family – from how they think and behave, to how they react to adults, to how the parents want the child to be fed, toilet trained or napped. It influences how children are accustomed to learning and of course, what language they are accustomed to learning in.

Recommendations

To enhance the potential of providing high-quality early education to all the children of Massachusetts, we offer three recommendations to the Department of Early Education and Care:

- 1 Group and School Age regulations require annual, pre-approved training designed to strengthen the educator's cultural competence. This training should be 10% of the annual requirements. In Group Day Care Programs, the requirement for full time staff is 20 hours per year. Part-time program's hours are pro-rated. In School Age Programs, the requirement for administrators and coordinators is 10 hours per year. For other staff the requirement is 5 hours per year.
- 2 Family Child Care Regulations require at least 2 hours each renewal period of pre-approved training designed to strengthen the provider's cultural competence. Family Child Care providers must complete a minimum of 15 hours of training during the 3-year term of their license; Family Child Care Plus Providers must complete at least 20 hours; and Large Family Child Care Providers must complete 30 hours of training.
- 3 Guidelines are developed which outline both the content of approved courses and the appropriate trainer qualifications. Courses should be approved through a EEC system to be determined and only approved trainings would be valid to fulfill requirements. EEC has 2 systems in place to approve continuing education: the Continuing Education Units (CEU) Project and the Professional Development Points System (PDP). These systems could be adapted to review and approve these trainings.

Summary

We acknowledge that these three recommendations will not be sufficient to create a culturally competent professional. What we anticipate is that educators will begin to:

- reflect on their daily care-giving/teaching practices;
- heighten their level of awareness of cultural influences; and
- increase their ability to interact competently with children and families.

The ultimate result of this mandated training will be the improvement in the quality of education and care for our children.

As Hedy Nai-Lin Chang writes: "the goal is for all children in our society to develop the skills needed to successfully negotiate the joys and challenges of living in a multicultural society. Grounding a child in a strong sense of identity and connection to family and community is part and parcel of this goal. Children who have this foundation are more likely to have the self-confidence and sense of efficacy which allows them to be comfortable and successful in multicultural settings."⁶

Marie Enochy
Lisa Sockabasin

Marcia Farris
Nicole St. Victor

References

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The Schott Fellowship in Early Care & Education
Valora Washington, PhD.
Cambridge College
1000 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138
617-873-0512
vw@cambridgecollege.edu