



## Ready to Educate ALL Children?

### *What Can Massachusetts and Higher Education Do To Ensure Cultural Competence?*

#### Introduction

**D**ata from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that the diversity of culture, ethnicity, and language in the state of Massachusetts is substantial.<sup>1</sup> While there are at least two large cultural clusters (e.g., Hispanic/Latino and Asian), the diversity within these clusters, as well as the representation of other multilingual and multicultural groups, is extensive. Consequently, larger numbers of children require multilingual staff as well as culturally sensitive approaches to meet their needs and their parents' "desires for their children's upbringing."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, "there is a significant and sustained need for child care and early education programs for young children from birth to five" to recognize the "increasing diversity in Massachusetts' children."<sup>3</sup>

Culturally competent early care and education services benefit children and families, both academically and socially. Proper preparation of practitioners is necessary to (1) offer a culturally sensitive practice that effectively communicates with children and families and (2) accurately assess community needs. The definition of "family" is influenced by culture; institutions working with the family must be aware of these cultural norms.<sup>4</sup>

While there is no universally accepted definition of cultural competence, the seminal work of Terry Cross and the National Center for Cultural Competence<sup>5</sup> suggests five essential elements that contribute to cultural competence. The individual, system/institution, or agency must:

- Value diversity by appreciating individualism and respecting individual differences;
- Have the capacity for cultural self-assessment by recognizing the assets of each individual's culture, and by continuously making quality improvements to ensure equal access and nondiscriminatory practices in service delivery;
- Be conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact;
- Incorporate cultural knowledge into policy making, infrastructure, and practice;
- Develop adaptations to service delivery that reflect an understanding of cultural diversity.

Despite the documented importance of having culturally competent practice and the growing diversity of our population, studies have found that higher education institutions in Massachusetts fall short of adequately preparing early education professionals to be culturally competent.<sup>6</sup> Many bachelor's degree programs:

- Devote a very limited amount of time, during coursework and practicum, to successfully teaching groups of diverse children and families;
- Do not address or acknowledge issues of linguistic diversity; and
- Have faculty who do not reflect the diversity of either children or the teaching staff.



## Endnotes

1. U.S. Census Bureau. *Massachusetts, ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates: 2005-2007*. Retrieved June 27, 2009, from [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=04000US25&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_DP3YR5&-ds\\_name=&-\\_lang=en&-redoLog=false](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=04000US25&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_DP3YR5&-ds_name=&-_lang=en&-redoLog=false)
2. Washington, V. (2008). *Role, relevance, reinvention: Higher education in the field of early care and education*. Cambridge, MA: The CAYL Institute. Retrieved September 3, 2009, from [http://cayl.org/files/Role%20Relevance%20Reinvention\\_0.pdf](http://cayl.org/files/Role%20Relevance%20Reinvention_0.pdf)
3. See endnote 2. Washington.
4. King, M., Sims, A., & Osher, D. *How is Cultural Competence Integrated in Education?* The Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice. Retrieved July 14, 2009, from [http://cecp.air.org/cultural/Q\\_integrated.htm](http://cecp.air.org/cultural/Q_integrated.htm)
5. National Center for Cultural Competence, (1998). *Cultural Competence: Definition and Conceptual Framework*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center. Retrieved June 27, 2009, from <http://www.nccccurricula.info/culturalcompetence.html>
6. See endnote 2. Washington.
7. See endnote 2. Washington.
8. Head Start English Language Learners Project. (2008). *Guide and Resources*. Denver, CO: Community Development Institute. Retrieved September 3, 2009, from <http://www.help.org/>
9. Washington, V., Kershaw, A., & Sprague, P. (2008, July). *Steps forward: Recommendations of the 2007-2008 Massachusetts early education and care and out-of-school time workforce development task force*. Boston, MA: Department of Early Education and Care. Retrieved September 3, 2009, from [http://cayl.org/files/EECTaskForce\\_0.pdf](http://cayl.org/files/EECTaskForce_0.pdf)
10. Office of the President of the United States. Education issues and the American recovery and reinvestment act. Retrieved June 27, 2009, from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/>

The CAYL Schott  
Fellowship in Early  
Care and Education

*Valora Washington, Ph.D.*  
President

**The CAYL Institute**  
PO Box 391378  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
phone: 617-354-3820  
fax: 617-354-3823  
[cayl.org](http://cayl.org)



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### The Massachusetts Challenge

Focus on diversity and ethnicity are rarely found when one examines key Massachusetts guidelines and regulations such as the Commonwealth's Early Childhood Program Standards, Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences, Licensing Regulations and Policies for Group Child Care, School Age and Family Child Care, and Enforcement Standards for Licensing Regulations (see Table A).

This policy paper expands on the national recommendation to address the need to "ensure that all faculty can provide appropriate content for our diverse population of children and families."<sup>7</sup>

### Findings

As a result of our research and a dialogue with over 80 faculty and practitioners in Massachusetts, we found there is a need to better ensure that all faculty and professionals in the field of early care and education are sufficiently competent to provide culturally sensitive content and environments to all children.

Participants in this forum discussed many of the challenges they face in regards to cultural competence in the field. Misconceptions of what it means to be culturally competent, assumptions that individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds are automatically culturally sensitive and how to incorporate appropriate cultural practices and activities in classroom curriculum are only a few of the challenges expressed by practitioners. Discussion among members of higher education institutions revealed some of the challenges professors face when attempting to meet the needs of adult learners who work full time, most of whom have families of their own and some whose native language is not English. These concerns are reciprocated by the students who struggle to meet course requirements as they fight to overcome these obstacles. Students expressed feeling a sense of alienation due to communication difficulties, lack of trust in government funded agencies, and feelings of being discriminated against.

**Table A: Word Count of Topics Related to Cultural Diversity in Massachusetts Standards and Regulations**

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	Early Childhood Program Standards	Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences	Licensing Regulations and Policies (Group Child Care and School Age Program Regulations)	Licensing Regulations and Policies (Family Child Care Licensing Regulations)	Enforcement Standards for Licensing Regulations
Race	2	0	0	0	1
Culture/Cultural	4	4	3	4	1
Ethnicity	2	0	0	0	0
Diversity	1	0	2	3	0
Background	12 (5 related to CORI/DSS checks)	0	2 (1 related to CORI/DSS checks)	2 (both related to CORI/DSS checks)	5 (all related to CORI/DSS checks)
Immigrant	0	0	0	0	0
Bilingual	0	0	0	0	0
Language	22 (mostly development)	36 (mostly specific to subject area)	2	1 (related to specific subject area)	0
Primary Language	1	1	1	0	0
Second Language	1	0	0	0	0
Preferred Language	3	0	0	0	0
Native Language	2	0	0	0	0
Spoken Language	0	1	0	0	0
Special Needs	2	0	9	9	0
Disabilities	44	20	10	4	0

This paper supports the need to increase the collective capacity of higher education institutions, statewide leadership, accrediting bodies and national organizations, and the community of practice to:

1. Adopt a definition of cultural competence for early care and education in Massachusetts
2. Determine minimum requirements for culturally competent early care and education professionals, including:
  - a. Type and number of courses to configure acceptable curricula
  - b. Number of credit hours
  - c. Practicum in culturally diverse and multilingual sites
  - d. Student teaching to include culturally diverse and multilingual children/classrooms
3. Clearly define the skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to cultural competence
4. Define measurement criteria, guidelines, and standards for credentialing and licensing bodies
5. Enforce an implementation plan/system that is actionable and timely

### Recommendations

Massachusetts can and must take specific steps to ensure cultural competence practice in our multiethnic state. We offer five suggestions, each of which is actionable even in these difficult financial times:

#### 1. Conduct a needs assessment:

The Department of Early Education and Care must undertake a systematic and methodical assessment of current efforts in place to maximize strengths and avoid duplication. Endeavors such as the Head Start English Language Learners Project (HELLP),<sup>8</sup> recently published by the Office of Head Start, are aimed at providing some guidance on best practices for serving English language learners.

#### 2. Define culturally sensitive content:

We call upon the Secretary of Education to convene statewide leadership, higher education institutions, accrediting bodies, national organizations, and the community of practice to develop a plan that supports cultural competence as a required content area for all programs in the state of Massachusetts aimed at preparing individuals to work with children and families.

#### 3. Follow up on work already done:

Implement statewide Core Competencies which are inclusive of all children and families. "Steps Forward: Recommendations of the 2007-2008 Massachusetts Early Education and Care and Out-of-School Time Workforce Development Task Force" is a place to start.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Retool higher education faculty:

Intentionally increase the diversity and level of competence of faculty to provide appropriate multicultural and multilingual content.

#### 5. Examine degrees offered:

We summon higher education institutions to reinvent and redesign core degree completion requirements and philosophy to incorporate an understanding of child development and learning from a multicultural and multilingual perspective.

## CONCLUSION

Although the early care and education field is characterized by its dearth of professional preparation for cultural competence, Massachusetts can lead the way by building upon its existing body of work. Even in these tough economic times, low-cost efforts to ensure cultural competence are necessary, practical, and beneficial to all.

Given the current state of the economy, the present administration is guided by the principle that providing a high-quality education for all children is critical to America's economic future. According to the Office of the White House, President Obama is committed to providing every child access to a complete and competitive education.<sup>10</sup> Therefore it is time to rise to the occasion and the opportunity to lay the foundation for an authentic democratic, highly developed, and prosperous society.

*Flossy Calderon, Sandra Bispham Parkin, Tomas Reyes*  
Mentors: *Marta Rosa and Adrienne Welch*

*A program of The CAYL Institute*