Introduction

This introduction was modified from the beginning of the publication *Family Partnerships and Culture*, by the California Department of Education and using the *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education* position statement by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. These wise words frame the purpose of this book and the course it is being used for, which are just the beginning of a journey.

Even though most families utilize some form of out-of-home care, children under the age of five continue to spend most of their early lives in the family setting. Consequently, families continue to play an especially important role in shaping the course of children’s early development. For this reason, families are an invaluable partner with early childhood programs.

Guided by cultural beliefs and principles, families select experiences, convey attitudes, and impart knowledge to their children to prepare them for adulthood. Accordingly, it is important for program staff to learn to collaborate effectively with families. To develop a partnership and to tap into the family as a primary resource, early childhood educators must reach out to, learn about, and develop strong partnerships with families. This process requires openness to learning and an effort to understand the individuality of each family and the diversity of the families from which the children come.

Culturally competent practices are essential in the early learning setting or environment in order to form authentic partnerships with families that promote children’s development. Specific knowledge of the child’s cultural or multicultural background and life at home can be the key to effective teaching and learning. This knowledge is a valuable tool for connecting what the child already knows and values to the new competencies that programs seek to nurture. To the extent that a program’s policies and approaches are informed by, reflective of, and congruent with the child’s experiences at home, children will find it easier to adapt to the requirements of the program and meet the program's expectations for achievement. Deeper knowledge of the children's family life will increase the likelihood that early childhood education programs will effectively meet children's needs and serve them successfully.
This is a complex yet worthwhile undertaking. Understanding the social conditions that children experience at home is complicated by the broad diversity of the children attending preschool programs. Many early childhood educators, by virtue of their personal backgrounds and training, may not have had the opportunity to gain the knowledge and experiences that would prepare them for working with culturally and linguistically diverse children. In light of this possible lack of knowledge and exposure, working closely with families can offer the opportunity to explore new ideas and approaches that improve the overall operation of the program. In turn, this will strengthen staff members’ ability to work well with the children they will encounter in classrooms in the twenty-first century.

This is especially important because some children are not flourishing in early childhood programs as much as expected. For those children, early difficulties in adjusting to school set them on a track of low academic performance, which may have dire consequences for their lives as adults. Collaborating with families is an important first step in improving such outcomes. Attention to the family’s culture and context increases the likelihood of an effective partnership with families that can make a world of difference for the child.

Deep knowledge of the family and its cultural context can provide early childhood educators with insights about the child’s thinking and behavior that are useful in planning and day-to-day interactions. Moreover, publicly honoring and celebrating the family reinforces a positive identity for the child and promotes in children the idea that they are valued by staff.

Accomplishing these aims requires both an awareness of the diversity of the people around oneself and an understanding of oneself as a cultural being. The dual goals are to increase awareness of the state’s diverse cultures and recognize how one’s own culture shapes behaviors, attitudes, and responses to those who are different. Specifically, cultural competence includes learning about the family lives of children and developing a deep understanding of the family’s culture. This, in turn, requires insight into the influence of one’s culture in relating to persons who belong to a different cultural group.

It takes an ongoing effort to become sensitive to the differences that are part of the surrounding world. For early childhood educators, this means becoming aware that the children in their care come from a variety of cultures. This awareness must go beyond superficial stereotypes. Educators must be aware of the ethnicity and national heritage of the children they serve. Getting historical and background information from families can shed light on their context, attitudes, and values. This information can also shed light on similarities and historical conflicts among groups that are important to know. When confronted with this diversity, early childhood educators must counter the human tendency to regard favorably those who share the same cultural attitudes and whose behavior aligns with one’s cultural standards and, conversely, to view disapprovingly the conduct of groups with beliefs, values, and behavioral standards that differ from one’s own.

The process of cultural self-reflection involves knowing one’s identity and the cultural community where one developed and learned as a child. It likewise involves awareness of one’s own cultural background, including examining how personal principles and beliefs may influence one’s approach to working with children and their families. For example, staff members should identify and reflect deeply on their own culture-based assumptions about important aspects of life, such as morality, nutrition, gender roles, child care, parent–child relations, appropriate displays of emotion, intimacy, family loyalty, and discipline. Individual beliefs and values come from many sources, the most influential of which is the family. Assumptions formed over a lifetime and passed down over the generations shape individual views of the world and the judgments staff members make about what is right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, and desirable or
undesirable. These views are so deeply ingrained that they are taken for granted and can easily be perceived as being universal and absolutely true.

The goal of cultural learning is to counter the human tendency to make assumptions about people who are different from oneself. It should also open one to the possibility that beliefs different from one’s own can offer legitimate ways to view and deal with life. When people identify their own cultural assumptions or faulty misconceptions, they may be less likely to criticize or devalue the practices of others. When early childhood educators examine the subjective and personal basis of their views of life and their practices, they will likely find it possible to broaden their worldview by approaching others with an open mind.

Finally, moving from reflection to action is important. Mastery of the information is not enough. Personal reflection on one’s own culture and learning about other cultures are the first steps on the path toward effective engagement with diverse children and families. To be effective, educators must move along the continuum from theory to practice, from intellectual understanding to attitudinal shifts and behavioral change.

Understanding of family and culture does not come quickly, nor can it be gleaned from a single source. It involves dual processes: paying attention to the diversity of people around oneself and to self-reflection on one’s own culture and family experiences. Applying knowledge to practice is difficult and defies simple formulae, prescriptions, or scripts. Increasing cultural awareness amounts to little without efforts to apply the knowledge gained toward making program policies and practices more culturally responsive. Indeed, this is the most important and, often, the most challenging step. It involves moving from a theoretical appreciation of cultural and familial differences to building relationships and implementing concrete practices that make the program more compatible with and responsive to the families served. It means that programs must approach families and establish meaningful relationships with them. To do this well, educators must develop an inclusive perspective, devise thoughtful strategies, and sustain implementation of those strategies over time.

Mastering this process involves building on cultural competence that includes authentic understanding and acceptance. It should also include cultural responsiveness characterized by action and application of the theory to program practices and policies and to interactions with families. Such a proactive stance is consistent with the universal design approach to pursue different pathways to make learning relevant to the diverse population of California’s children (CDE 2011, 5). This process requires patience and persistence.[1]

Recommendations for Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has a 24 page position statement on advancing equity in early childhood education. Here are some excerpts and summaries of their recommendations.

It is important for all those in early childhood education to:

1. Build their awareness and understanding of their own culture, personal beliefs, values, and biases.
2. Recognize the power and benefits of diversity and inclusivity.
3. Take responsibility for biased actions, even those that are unintentional, and actively work to repair the harm done.
4. Acknowledge and seek to understand structural inequities and their impact.
5. View a commitment to cultural responsiveness as an ongoing process.
6. Recognize that much of the theory and research in ECE is largely based on the normative perspective of White, middle-class children with disabilities in English-language schools.

"Recognizing that both institutional and interpersonal systems must change, [their] recommendations begin with…self-reflection, a willingness to respectfully listen to others’ perspectives without interruption or defensiveness, and a commitment to continuous learning to improve practice. Members of groups that have historically enjoyed advantages must be willing to recognize the often unintended consequences of ignorance, action, and inaction and how they may contribute to perpetuating existing systems of privilege."[2]

[1] Family Partnerships and Culture by the California Department of Education is used with permission