Honoring Differences: Essential Features of Appropriate ECSE Services for Young Children From Diverse Sociocultural Environments

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What is This?
As Shelton (1999) stated, "... the more closely we examine a complex problem, the fuzzier its solution is likely to be" (p. 49). It is easy to become overwhelmed as one examines the practical implications of providing appropriate ECSE services to culturally-linguistically diverse (CLD) children and families (i.e., children and families who: [1] speak language[s] other than English at home; and/or [2] have values, beliefs, understandings, and practices different from those considered normative in ECSE literature and settings). Despite all the attention paid to the presence of diverse cultures and languages in ECSE settings during the past ten years, there remains a need to explore the application of recommended practices to concrete situations in which resources may be limited and family characteristics different from those described in the literature. The purpose of this article is to share specific service features that can help programs honor differences in all situations, even when resources are significantly limited. These service features were initially identified and successfully piloted during the three-year implementation of "CROSSROADS," a federally funded demonstration program that provided technical assistance to ECSE programs on services for children with special needs from culturally-linguistically diverse backgrounds (Barrera & Hoot, 1990). They also have been cross-referenced to current theory and research.

Service Features

Through the implementation of "CROSSROADS," six program features were found to help programs honor cultural-linguistic differences. These features are especially important because of their accessibility to any program in any area, however remote or isolated. They are not dependent upon finding fully trained personnel, though they do not replace the need for such personnel. Honoring the rich differences that children and families bring to ECSE programs should not be dependent on a specific level of resources, but rather should be the practice in every program, even as efforts continue to increase resources and prepare personnel.

Feature #1: Recognizing the Pervasive Influence of Culture and Cultural Dynamics

The experience of "CROSSROADS" staff over three years and eight different programs substantiated the importance of focusing on what culture is and how it tends to operate in families. Cultural identities are relevant and valid in relation to all families and children precisely because culture is a pervasive reality. All of us see individuals and all else in the world around us through culturally-tinted lenses (i.e., through the conceptual and behavioral templates we have adopted, both consciously and unconsciously). The words we use and the categories we tend to perceive are largely the result of the
culture(s) in which we participate. Children raised in the Navajo tradition, for example, are exposed to dramatically different perceptions and conceptualizations of time than are children raised within other cultural traditions. This exposure may not be consciously directed. Its presence may, in fact, not be conscious at all, but may be embedded in the pace and structure of daily activities and expectations surrounding them (Cole, 1996; Greenfield, 1994).

The purpose of recognizing culture and cultural dynamics is not to predict or anticipate. It is, rather, to become open and respectful to diverse behaviors even when these are outside of our areas of familiarity. In effect, such recognition expands our appreciation of how truly unique all individuals are. Langer (1989) discusses this apparent paradox: "These efforts [to combat prejudice by reducing categorization] are based on the view that, in an ideal world, everyone should be considered equal, falling under the single category of 'human being'" (p. 154). She suggests "... a different approach to combating prejudice—one in which we learn to make more, rather than fewer, distinctions among people" (p. 154). That way the likelihood that someone's identity can be defined by a single category is greatly reduced.

In working with programs to respond to children's and families' needs, "CROSSROADS" staff identified various issues that came up repeatedly as programs explored how to honor cultural-linguistic diversity. These issues could be grouped into three interrelated dimensions reflective of their content: (1) communicative-linguistic (i.e., issues related to how we communicate and interact); (2) sensory-cognitive (i.e., issues of what and how we know); and (3) personal-social (i.e., issues related to power, identity, and sense of self) (see Table 1). Many of the challenges to honoring differences faced by the programs with which "CROSSROADS" staff worked were related to diversity between family perspectives on these issues and practitioner/program perspectives.

Communicative-Linguistic Dimension
Differences in the language(s) used in the child's primary caregiving environment(s) and language(s) used by ECSE practitioners were, of course, an obvious challenge. Another, more subtle, challenge resulted from differences in the relative value placed on verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., ECSE objectives might emphasize oral vocabulary, while family members placed more value on appropriate nonverbal communication, such as silence when elders were speaking). An interesting discussion about these more subtle challenges can be found in Bowers and Flinders (1990).

Sensory-Cognitive Dimension
Differences in the aspects of situations, persons, and objects that families or practitioners deemed most important, what Moll and Greeberg (1990) term "funds of knowledge," also presented significant challenges to collaboration and communication between practitioners and families. A mother might, for example, know and care a great deal about her daughter's social abilities, but might focus much less on her ability to finish a three-piece form puzzle, and might in fact be puzzled about why an ECSE practitioner finds this task so significant. Rothstein-Fisch (1998) provides several excellent examples of these challenges in relation to kindergarten situations.

Personal-Social Dimension
A third source of challenges can be clustered into the personal-social dimension, which addresses not what we know but who we are. One common difference involved varying perspectives on "autonomy" and the degree of parent-child separation that this entails. Family beliefs and practices often differed significantly from those of practitioners in this area, especially in relation to the degree of comfort with assistance given to children completing a task.

Table 1 lists other specific areas within each dimension in which differences were likely to be evident and present a challenge. Clarification of and responsiveness to these differences was an impor-
tant strategy for honoring diversity. The remaining features address a range of specific strategies that “CROSSROADS” staff used to help programs honor diverse perspectives within each of these three dimensions. (Additional information on the specific areas can be obtained from the sources referenced in this article.)

Feature #2: Increasing Access Between Families and Services

Once culture is acknowledged as an educationally valid construct for all children, one of the major hurdles in serving diverse children with special needs and their families is access—both access to services by the families (i.e., knowing where services are and how to get them), and access to the families by the practitioners (i.e., knowing how to reach CLD populations and getting appropriate information to them). Implementation of the “CROSSROADS” program yielded data indicating the importance of oral, face-to-face contact in increasing families’ access to ECSE services across a variety of cultural-linguistic groups. This was often not a simple matter of literacy. Many families placed more credibility on oral communication than on written communication;

Table 1

Specific Areas Particularly Sensitive to Culture and Cultural Dynamics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicative-Linguistic</th>
<th>Sensory-Cognitive</th>
<th>Personal-Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Language(s) of the child’s primary caregiving environment(s)</td>
<td>1. Funds of knowledge (i.e., What knowledge and concepts are valued? What types of information are familiar to the family? Are funds of knowledge primarily personal and familial? Communal? Institutionalized?)</td>
<td>1. Degree of family’s acculturation into culture(s) other than the one they identify as primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Child’s relative language proficiency (degree of proficiency in all languages used)</td>
<td>2. Preferred strategies for acquiring new learning (e.g., verbal over nonverbal, modeling or reading)</td>
<td>2. Degree of acculturation into US “professional” culture (e.g., health professions, ECSE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Patterns of language usage in child’s primary caregiving environment(s) (e.g., What is each language used for? Who says what to whom? In what language?)</td>
<td>3. Preferred strategies for problem solving and decision making (e.g., interpersonal, linear, circular, individual or communal)</td>
<td>3. Construction of sense of self (e.g., relative weight given to self-reliance as compared to social referencing, value placed on autonomy as compared to interdependence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Relative value placed on verbal and nonverbal communication, both explicit (when asked) and implicit (when observed)</td>
<td>4. World view (i.e., assumptions about how the world works, about “right” and “wrong”; how events are explained and understood)</td>
<td>4. Family structure and process (e.g., Who is designated as primary authority figure[s]? What roles tend to be adopted?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Relative status associated with non-English language and bilingualism, both explicit and implicit (i.e., Does the family speak a language that is highly valued by nonspeakers? Is bilingualism seen as an asset or a risk?)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5. Perceptions of identity and competence (e.g., What characteristics define competence?)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6. Knowledge and experience related to power and social positioning</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7. Values and beliefs associated with obtaining and providing support for adults and children</td>
</tr>
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or they simply found it more familiar and preferable, regardless of their level of literacy. One way of disseminating information orally that proved to be highly effective was to contact significant persons in particular neighborhoods or areas where there were concentrations of diverse populations. These persons included clergy, respected community leaders, and staff from other agencies.

The degree of credibility established by ECSE programs and practitioners was also found to influence access. Many families had had negative experiences with "friendly intruders" (e.g., social workers, medical personnel). Some families had no familiarity with service providers and, thus, no script for interacting with them; other families had scripts that were not applicable to the particular settings in which they now found themselves. Practitioners were often total strangers seeking to obtain information not typically given to total strangers by members of any culture. In addition, practitioners did not always speak the families' home language(s) and sometimes behaved in unpredictable or unacceptable ways from the families' perspectives. All of these issues were compounded by families’ previous experiences with services that were more discontinuous than continuous (e.g., not seeing the same person twice).

Establishing personal and programmatic credibility involved being willing to enter into extended and reciprocal relationships within which personal information was given as well as requested. Practitioners were at times asked, “Are you married?” or “Do you have any children?” In professional settings, these questions may be perceived as intrusive, or as trying to establish a personal relationship instead of a professional one. Far from being intrusive, however, such questioning came to be considered a way of assessing values and beliefs (i.e., as a way of coming to know who a person was and how best to relate to them). From this perspective, these questions helped families to build a common bond with ECSE practitioners rather than a “one-up, one-down” connection often established by coming into a home as the professional expert or helper.

Feature #3: Recognizing the Importance of Establishing Rapport

The dictionary defines rapport as "relation marked by harmony, conformity, accord, or affinity" (Mirriam-Webster, 1999). The experience of “CROSSROADS” staff indicated that, once contact was made with families and general information given, establishing rapport must become an essential feature of service delivery. Rapport tends to be most easily established when one person involved feels that the other person both understands his or her point of view, and validates that point of view in some way (Brooks, 1989). When serving children and families whose cultural parameters and language(s) are different from those of the ECSE program or staff, however, there is a strong probability that experiential and conceptual perspectives will be dissimilar. Thus, establishing rapport may not occur as easily; it may require careful and explicit attention. Adults and children entering new and unfamiliar arenas often scan unconsciously for clues to the question “Do you know how I feel?” and then respond accordingly (Anderson, 1999). There were two keys to facilitating rapport in these instances. The first was an understanding of the stress that often accompanies learning new cultural parameters and language(s) (Igoa, 1995). This stress can arise from one or more of the following:

1. The subjective experience of being, or being perceived as, different or an outsider.
2. The psychological experience of finding that one is no longer competent at things that, in other settings, one has already mastered (e.g., giving a compliment, asking a question).
3. The loss/grief that may accompany decreased access to familiar places and persons.
4. The role reversal that can happen as parents and other adults lag behind children in various areas of adaptation and learning, such as language.
5. The loss of authority and credibility that can occur as children reject the old ways in favor of new ones.

Recognition of these factors was communicated to the family both verbally and nonverbally.
through a variety of strategies such as those described in Feature #4.

The second key to facilitating rapport was effective and responsive communication. All too often families from diverse cultural backgrounds are expected to do all the necessary adaptation (e.g., learn English, bring an interpreter, explain their culture) at the same time that they are dealing with the stress of having suspected delays or disabilities confirmed. Use of home language(s); nonjudgmental acceptance of diverse behaviors; the presence of someone with whom the family could identify; adaptation of procedures to avoid negative perceptions (e.g., not asking direct personal questions such as, “Did you breastfeed your child?” in the initial interview)—all these behaviors and other similar ones were used to communicate both respect and acceptance.

Responsive communication requires recognition of potential “culture bumps” (Archer, 1986; Barrera, 1989). A culture bump is a behavior or situation that is experienced negatively because it is perceived, consciously or unconsciously, to be in conflict with the observer’s own values, beliefs, or expectations. The family or child and the practitioner(s) figuratively “bump up against” something and feel jostled or disturbed to a greater or lesser degree. Culture bumps were anticipated and adjusted for by reviewing similarities and differences between families and practitioners in the areas listed in Feature #1. Common strategies included checking ahead of time on whether specific arrangements were likely to communicate respect or disrespect to families from a particular background, ensuring that program staff communicated in ways that made sense within a family’s values and belief system (e.g., using an indirect style instead of a direct style for making requests), and drawing on families’ funds of knowledge (Moll & Greeberg, 1990) when explaining children’s strengths and limitations (e.g., using familiar terms and scenarios).

Feature #4: Supporting Families’ Efforts to Deal With Diverse Culture(s) and Language(s)

Few families come into ECSE programs and explicitly state, “We are culturally-linguistically diverse and desire support and adaptation of your procedures.” “CROSSROADS” staff were aware, from their own experiences and from conversations with families, that there could be some degree of shame connected with being less than proficient in English or with being insufficiently familiar with the culture reflected in the ECSE program. It was decided, therefore, that the practitioners should bear primary responsibility for identifying the role that culture and language played in a particular situation, and should then provide the necessary support. While it was recognized that families often needed to acquire proficiency in English and learn to function competently in the setting(s) in which they found themselves, it also was recognized that they did not necessarily need to do so while addressing their child’s delay/disability and negotiating the special education process.

One effective means of providing family support was the use of “Parent Partners”; paraprofessionals and volunteers fluent in a family’s language and culture whose responsibility it was to be with the family during key times such as home visits, clinic visits, assessments, and meetings with ECSE personnel. The goal of Parent Partners was to mediate between familiar and unfamiliar aspects of a particular situation, while also helping the family to negotiate these aspects on their own subsequently. One Parent Partner, for example, assisted a young mother who had to come in for an assessment and did not have transportation or speak much English. She went to the mother’s home and showed her how to call for a Medicaid-paid taxi, something the mother had never done. This mother had also expressed some anxiety about getting into a cab driven by a stranger since she had little experience going out unaccompanied. The Parent Partner accompanied her on her first trip, showing her how to give written directions to the driver. For her second trip, the Parent Partner went to her home and followed the taxi to the appointment site. By the third trip, the mother was comfortable just being met at the site by the Parent Partner. She could now get to appointments by herself, and had new confidence in
her ability to learn and negotiate unfamiliar situations. This mother was soon helping other parents with the same difficulties she initially had experienced.

Feature #5: Developing Reciprocal “Additive” Responses to Families and Children

ECSE services and settings can respond to culturally-linguistically diverse children and families in either a subtractive fashion or an additive, reciprocal fashion (Cummins & McNeely, 1987). Subtractive responses carry an implicit or explicit message that the old must be left behind so that the new can replace it (e.g., families must suspend the use of Spanish in order for their child to learn English). Additive responses, on the other hand, do not see a conflict between existing and new behaviors; they support the addition of new information or behaviors to the old. In this type of response, practitioners respect the linguistic and behavioral repertoire of the children and their families and seek to expand rather than limit it. Adaptation efforts are accepted with the understanding that acculturation is a highly complex and often stressful process requiring time and risk-taking. Rather than favoring professional expertise over families’ experiences, additive responses view interactions as a two-way process in which the parties are each responsive to and shaped by the other. Rules within this response system therefore tend to recognize a more equal distribution of knowledge and to define relationships more personally.

Reciprocity, however, does not imply that change is unnecessary. To reduce it to those terms does a tremendous disservice to everyone concerned. The real issue addressed by this feature is the degree to which practitioners equalize and distribute power, and then communicate to children and families that their home language and culture are a valuable asset, rather than a liability. It is this message that was found to be key. Once it was in place, families’ confidence in their ability to participate as equal partners in making decisions about language usage and acculturation increased noticeably.

Feature #6: Addressing the Need for Cultural-Linguistic Mediation

Greenberg and Kaniel (1990) state that a “... significant variable in cultural transition is mediated learning” (p. 139). The term mediation in this context refers to “... the way in which stimuli emitted by the environment are transformed by a ‘mediating’ agent, usually a parent, sibling, or other caregiver .... The mediator selects stimuli that are most appropriate and then frames, filters, and schedules them ... ” (Feuerstein, 1980, pp. 16-17). Data from “CROSSROADS” indicated two reasons making mediation necessary when providing services to children and families whose cultural parameters and language were diverse from practitioners’.

The first reason related to the family’s need to negotiate unfamiliar values, beliefs, behaviors, and expectations (i.e., cultures). Existing mediation skills often become inappropriate or ineffective for both children and family members when cultural contexts change, as happens between home and school for culturally-linguistically diverse children. In addition, when contexts change beyond our ability to mediate them, feelings of failure, inadequacy, and/or incompetence may result. The experience of no longer being competent at something one has previously mastered (e.g., asking for help) can have both cognitive and psychological ramifications, especially for young children just developing their sense of self and competence (Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988). “CROSSROADS” practitioners, understanding the process of mediation and recognizing its importance, developed specific mediation strategies to help children and families learn new skills while minimizing or eliminating feelings of incompetence. For example, information was often broken down into smaller bits; unfamiliar cultural expectations were explicitly discussed and explained; and coping strategies, such as using tape recorders at medical appointments, were explicitly taught.

The second reason related to mediation across languages, which while a component of culture, merits separate attention. Language is a primary mediation tool; most of us use language to...
frame and filter stimuli, as well as to interact with others. It is difficult, if not impossible, to think about something or negotiate a situation when one does not have the necessary language. Westby (1985) said that one cannot learn a language and learn through that language at the same time. The focus of the two processes is simply too different. When one is learning a language, one’s focus tends to be on simple decoding (e.g., if one cannot be sure whether someone is describing a horse or a house, it is difficult to learn what is being said about the subject, and if one is still trying to figure out what was just said, one cannot listen well to the sentences that follow that initial utterance).

One effective way “CROSSROADS” staff found to provide necessary culture and language mediation even when there was limited access to practitioners fluent in the child’s home language and culture was through the use of language-culture “mediators” or brokers. Language-culture mediators were persons who could go between two or more languages or cultures: buffering differences, explaining the unfamiliar, and, in general, making one comprehensible to the other. Language-culture mediators were familiar with the three dimensions of behavior and learning that were determined to be particularly vulnerable (as described in Feature #1). They learned to examine the areas within each dimension for possible cultural or linguistic dissonance and miscommunications (see Barrera, 1996; Barrera & Kramer, 1997). Ideally, ECSE practitioners themselves assumed the role of language-culture mediators with the support of “CROSSROADS” staff; when this was not possible, persons were brought in from other settings (e.g., community centers, churches). The term “mediator” was selected over “translator” or “interpreter” for two reasons. First, a mediator’s role is broader that just translating and interpreting verbal language. Second, it is important to recognize that translating and interpreting are highly complex skills that require not just a knowledge of particular vocabulary, but also extensive familiarity with and understanding of the cultural context(s) from which that vocabulary derives meaning.

The role of language-culture mediators in “CROSSROADS” was twofold: (1) to assist ECSE practitioners in becoming aware of and responsive to the values, behaviors, and rules that are typical within a particular family’s cultural context(s); and (2) to assist the family in becoming familiar with and negotiating the values, behaviors, and rules common to the ECSE service system and to special education in general. This latter role required that, if persons other than ECSE practitioners were employed as mediators, practitioners spend time familiarizing them with activities and procedures. “CROSSROADS” language-culture mediators enacted their roles through many different activities: being Parent Partners, translating, participating in staff training activities, and working to establish curricula. It was their goal to bridge familiar and unfamiliar cultures and languages.

**Perspective, Patience, and Process**

As O’Conner (1987) states, “We cannot have dialogue unless we honor the differences” (p. 39). There is sometimes a tendency to believe that, when optimum services cannot be provided, there is little that can be done until such services are secured. As a result, practitioners may overlook all that can be done even while continuing to search for better alternatives. Honoring cultural differences may, then, require a shift in practitioners’ perspectives as well as a critical review of values and assumptions reflected in typical ECSE settings, materials, and procedures. The service features discussed here provide some ideas, based on one program’s efforts and experiences, of how this could be done. They provide a perspective within which honoring cultural-linguistic differences can, with patience, become an ongoing process.

“We cannot have dialogue unless we honor the differences....”
Note
Additional resources are available from the author via e-mail. You can reach Isaura Barrera by e-mail at ibarr@unm.edu

References


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