

## Taking the Next Step

# Preparing Teachers to Work with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children

Jerlean Daniel and Susan Friedman



The Head Start Program operated by the Community Action Partnership of Ramsey and Washington Counties in St. Paul, Minnesota, provides services for 1,400 children and their families. The families come from many cultural backgrounds and countries including Laos, Somalia, Mexico, Sudan, Eritrea, and Vietnam. In a typical classroom, children's home languages include Hmong, Spanish, Oromo, Somali, Amharic, Tigrigna, English, and Vietnamese. Teachers must know how to support the learning of all of the children in their classes.

The Argonne Child Development Center in San Francisco serves 66 general education and 18 special education children and their families representing countries and cultures from around the world. In a typical classroom, teachers interact with children whose home languages include Vietnamese, English, Spanish, and Chinese dialects such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Chiu Chow, and Toi Shang. All teachers communicate with children mainly in English.

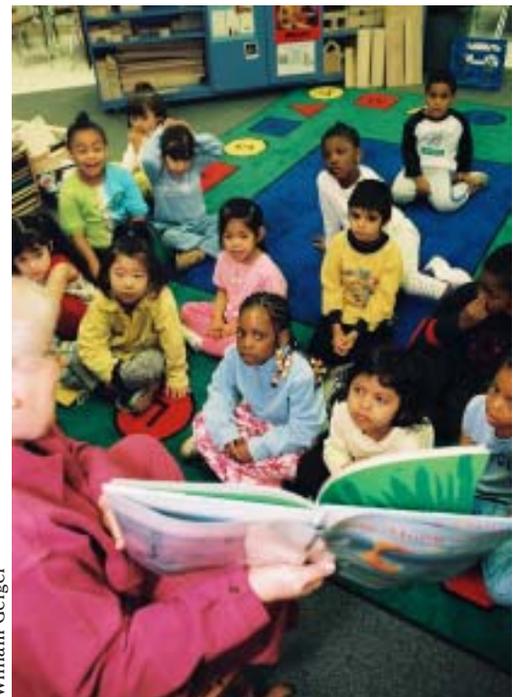
**More children from immigrant households are enrolled in early childhood programs than ever before, and the trend is expected to continue into the next decade.**

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**E**arly childhood educators across the United States must be prepared to teach an increasingly diverse population of young children. More children from immigrant households are enrolled in early childhood programs than ever before, and the trend is expected to continue into the next decade. The 2000 census shows that in just 10 years the number of children in immigrant families increased by 63 percent—and not just in large cities but in many areas of the country (Beavers & D'Amico 2005). The Black population (immigrant and nonimmigrant) grew at a rate exceeding that of the general population (McKinnon 2001) between 1990 and 2000; the Latino population (both immigrant and nonimmigrant) grew by more than 50 percent



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during those same years and is now the single largest group contributing to the nation's diversity (Guzmán 2001).

In this article we consider how teacher-training programs are preparing teachers to work with young children who are linguistically and culturally diverse. Overall there has been much progress over the last quarter century in preparing teachers to meet the education needs of linguistically and culturally diverse children. Most early childhood teacher education programs now require students to take some general course work related to the topic of diversity (Ray, Bowman, & Robbins 2005). Of course, the adult students in these programs are themselves from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds; they present teacher educators with challenges in meeting their diverse needs (NAEYC, NAECTE, & ACCESS 2004) but also opportunities to learn.

Despite such progress, however, recent research indicates that teachers believe they have not been adequately prepared to teach children from cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their own and that they need to learn more specific skills to do so (Ray & Bowman 2003; Ryan, Ackerman, & Song 2005). As early childhood educators continue to look for ways to address the needs of diverse children and families, it is important to pay attention to this request from classroom teachers for specific information about good practice. As early childhood educators continue to look for ways to address the needs of diverse children and families, it is important to pay attention to this request from classroom teachers for specific information about good practice. More specific training in working with diverse children may be one way to help teachers address the persistent academic achievement gaps between White and Black and Latino children (CEP 2001). The question is, how can early childhood education preparation programs provide their students with the specific strategies and diverse student teaching opportunities that will allow them to competently meet the needs of the diverse children in their classrooms?

### Teachers feel unprepared

NAEYC's position statement "Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity" (1995) indicates that it is important for teachers to have the skills and understanding to recognize that all children are cognitively, linguistically, and emotionally connected to the language and culture of their home; this understanding should be manifested in their training and practice. When program settings and teachers acknowledge and support children's home language and culture, ties between the family and school are strengthened. In fact, this is the essence of being culturally competent in an educational setting.

Although many institutions require education students to take some course work related to diversity issues, there is evidence that many teachers do not feel prepared to support the learning of the diverse children they find in their classrooms. Clearly, cultural competence is one of the critical goals of teachers striving to be effective, reflective practitioners serving all children. Some headway has been made in the strength-based approaches of the family support movement, and there is now greater awareness of the need for teachers to be responsive to children's and families' diversity. But according to Aisha Ray of the Erikson Institute, "The diversity training teachers are getting is not specific enough" (pers. comm.). Examples of the specific strategies teachers could use include appropriate practices for teaching children with a home language other than English or approaches for providing meaningful curriculum for both native English speakers and English-language learners who are in the same classroom. These strategies could be learned through course work or internship placements, among other possibilities.

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In a study conducted in Chicago, in which teachers explored their own competence in teaching culturally and linguistically diverse children, the majority felt they had learned how to work with culturally different children and families from other teachers and through their own hard-won knowledge—not from their teacher training experience or professional development workshops on diversity (Ray & Bowman 2003). And in a recent study of New Jersey preschool teachers, nearly one-third of the teachers questioned indicated they did not have adequate preparation to work with children whose first language was not English. They described their course work in this area as being less applicable to their current classroom context than their course work on all other topics (Ryan, Ackerman, & Song 2005). Sharon Ryan of Rutgers University, one of the study's authors, states: "Teachers would get more from learning about specific teaching strategies throughout their early childhood classes rather than only in a general topic course on diversity" (pers. comm.). In this way, teachers learn that differentiating instruction in response to the cultural backgrounds of students is part of their everyday work.

### **Some innovative teacher training programs**

The research by Ryan and her colleagues (2005) and Ray and her colleagues (2003, 2005) indicates that although many teacher training and professional development programs offer general course work on diversity, teacher education programs should consider adding or requiring more specific course work and internship programs to adequately prepare teachers to meet the needs of today's diverse early childhood classes (see also Lobman, Ryan, & McLaughlin in press). In talking with educators from across the country, we learned of several interesting and innovative teacher training programs that address some of these specific issues. At the end of this article we solicit additional descriptions of other teacher education and professional development programs that are addressing teachers' need for specificity regarding practice in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms.

### **Diverse internship sites**

One important aspect of teacher education is the internship or student teaching experience. Very few programs offer or require internships in diverse settings. Wheelock College in Boston is an exception; it focuses on partnering with urban schools to provide student teachers with many opportunities to actively learn in diverse settings. As Cheryl Render Brown, an associate professor of early childhood education at Wheelock, describes, "We like to see the marriage of theory and practice. Students are really getting out there in our communities that are different than the communities they come from. We specifically place students in settings where they will be faced with the issues that come up when a class has children who do not speak English, where the children are very diverse" (pers. comm.). These student teachers participate simultaneously in Reflective Seminars during which they explore the issues that arise at their internship sites through discussion and further readings. For more information, visit [www.wheelock.edu/fld/fldhome.asp](http://www.wheelock.edu/fld/fldhome.asp).



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### Outreach to infuse diversity in preservice education

In North Carolina, the Crosswalks Project is developing and testing a framework to support early childhood faculty in preparing students to work effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. The program is designed to integrate diversity-related strategies into course work, field experiences, and program practices through collaboration between faculty on the campuses of about 20 public and private colleges and universities across the state. Crosswalks is also building a database framed by various national standards in early childhood education that will enable faculty to search for high-quality, low-cost resources that address both required content and diversity. Among the project's goals: increase faculty knowledge related to integrating diversity into course work, field experiences, and programs; increase the capacity of graduates to work effectively with diverse children, families, and colleagues; disseminate a model (measures, framework, toolbox) that can be used by any faculty member or preservice program to prepare students to be comfortable, confident, and capable resources for diverse children and families. For further information, visit

[www.fpg.unc.edu/projects/project\\_detail.cfm?projectID=371](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/projects/project_detail.cfm?projectID=371).

### An integrated approach

In Virginia, the Unified Transformative Early Education Model (UTEEM) Early Childhood Program at George Mason University takes an integrated approach to preparing teachers to work with culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse young children and their families. Faculty have blended three separate master's-level programs to create a comprehensive course of study with significant emphasis on diversity and exceptionality—Early Childhood Education (pre-K to grade 3), Early Childhood Special Education (birth to age five), and English as a Second Language Education (pre-K to grade 12). Graduates receive Virginia licensure in each of the three areas.

### Diversification of the teacher/practitioner pipeline

Early childhood educators who speak a home language other than English often face major hurdles when trying to obtain an associate or bachelor's degree. One of these hurdles is meeting an English-language requirement before beginning early childhood course work. Typically, to pass English language competency tests entails five to seven years of studying English (Juanita Santana, pers. comm.).

The Oregon Child Development Coalition in Portland, in collaboration with Pacific Oaks College Northwest, designed an innovative way to address this challenge. Through a three-year Bilingual P-3 (preschool through third grade) Teacher Education Program funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of English Language Acquisition, the coalition provided early childhood courses in both English and Spanish, with translation provided during the first year. Translation services were gradually decreased over time, and by the third year, translation was not included. Half of the students enrolled in the program were Spanish dominant and half were English dominant. The program required that participants become fluent and literate in Spanish, Academic Spanish, English, and Academic English.

By the end of the three-year period, the 40 graduates were bilingual early childhood teachers. This model is currently being used at the Praxis Institute for Early Childhood Education in Seattle, Washington (Praxis Institute—Early Learning, 1133 34th Avenue, Seattle, WA 98122; 206-328-6436).



### Getting from here to there

The programs described above can offer lessons learned and serve as models for future efforts. In general terms, all teacher educators—including faculty from both two- and four-year institutions—can serve as role models of lifelong learning, teaching practice, and service in relation to cultural and linguistic diversity. As members of a broader community of learners, teacher educators can gain knowledge and insights from the diverse backgrounds of their students as they provide a powerful and dynamic image that inspires others to reflect on their practice. Faculty can encourage all capable students to pursue advanced study to reach their full potential, thus enriching the academic environment with diverse perspectives and

increasing the pool of diverse educators who can help future students to achieve cultural competence.

In an effort to move the field toward greater teacher competency in addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse children, it might be helpful to consider conditions that could position teacher preparation programs to offer more specifics on effective practice in diverse classrooms. Aisha Ray of the Erikson Institute proposes the following conditions, based on her current research inquiries (pers. comm.).

### Preparation of teachers: Working toward greater cultural and linguistic competence

**To what extent are faculty members working effectively with diverse communities and sharing with students how they themselves are challenged by such experiences?**

**1. Increased faculty knowledge**—To what extent do teacher education faculty have significant depth and breadth of knowledge to support student understanding of both theory and research-based strategies regarding culture, language, race, social class, special needs, and other dimensions of diversity? In the area of language, such specifics involve acquiring knowledge and learning appropriate practices related to language acquisition for these three groups: monolinguals, bilinguals, and speakers of English dialects.

**2. Enhanced faculty dispositions and willingness to adapt and change**—Education has come a long way in integrating special needs expertise among faculty and into course offerings. How can faculty engage in collegial discussions to develop and critique their own knowledge base regarding the complex areas of child development and diversity? To what extent are faculty members disposed to grapple with the real issues of diversity and racism?

**3. Ongoing faculty practice**—To what extent are faculty members working effectively with diverse communities and sharing with students how they themselves are challenged by such experiences? How do faculty model for students ways to deal with feelings of bias? Including students in the reciprocal partnerships among faculty and diverse communities that are often created through faculty research and/or service is one way to access this kind of meaningful dialogue.

## Join the Discussion . . .

Please e-mail the authors at [editorial@naeyc.org](mailto:editorial@naeyc.org) with information about your programs.

NAEYC would like to gather additional profiles of innovative teacher preparation programs and professional development systems that model ways to prepare culturally and linguistically competent professionals. Please e-mail the authors at [editorial@naeyc.org](mailto:editorial@naeyc.org) with information about such programs. Write **Diversity and professional preparation** in the subject line of the e-mail. An update on this topic will be featured in a future issue of *Beyond the Journal* ([www.journal.naeyc.org/btj](http://www.journal.naeyc.org/btj)).

We also invite your feedback on the initial list of proposed conditions that might advance the field's work in preparing teachers to support the learning of children from diverse cultures. The perspectives of faculty, administrators, teachers, trainers, students, and others can enrich our intentionally reflective dialogue and advance our practice. Please send your comments to [editorial@naeyc.org](mailto:editorial@naeyc.org).

Discussions among these many groups of stakeholders can enrich the field's progress toward meeting the needs of all young children and families.

**4. Required student practicums and internships in diverse settings**—In a current study that looks at diversity requirements in 226 bachelor's-level early childhood teacher education programs across the country, only seven percent of programs report that they require students to teach in a diverse setting (Ray, Bowman, & Robbins 2005). When students placed in internships are teaching children whose home language is a language other than English and who come from many diverse cultures, faculty should provide support in the form of discussion groups, reflective advising, and further reading.

**5. Integration of significant diversity content in all course work**—Required course work for early childhood education students must sufficiently address issues of diversity. This cannot be done with one or two classes devoted to “urban,” “minority,” or “second-language learners.” Recently analyzed data indicate that the majority of programs require, on average, only eight semester hours (about two courses) on diversity issues. That represents 12 percent of the average 67 professional semester hours a student must complete in his or her course of study (Ray, Bowman, & Robbins 2005).

**6. Required ESL courses for teachers**—Given the increasing number of young children who are English-language learners, early childhood education students must be required to take course work that will teach them about ESL (English as a second language). This is not occurring in most programs, but is absolutely essential given the number of children with home languages other than English in early childhood classrooms.

We hope these conditions can be considered from several different perspectives, including those of faculty and administrators, students, current teachers seeking inservice professional development, and all advocates with high expectations for more effective, inclusive responses to the needs of diverse young children. Discussions among these stakeholders can enrich the field's progress toward meeting the needs of all young children and families.

## Conclusion

### A first step . . .

Read **Screening and Assessment of Young English-Language Learners**, a supplement to “Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation,” a joint position statement of NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. Available online at [www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/ELL\\_Supplement.pdf](http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/ELL_Supplement.pdf).

As the 2000 U.S. Census indicates, this country’s population of young children will continue to become more diverse. Teachers need to learn specific strategies for working effectively with linguistically and culturally diverse children and families. Although a few innovative programs exist, it is clear that much more needs to be done. Teachers have said they need greater specificity around issues of cultural and linguistic diversity. Together we can learn and implement approaches that work for children. In the process we will raise new questions and suggest research queries, all in an effort to demystify an important goal for all of us, cultural competence.

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